

1996

# Returning home : a comparative study of Zhuang Zi and Meister Eckhart

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.c84w-q96u>  
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**RETURNING HOME:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ZHUANG ZI AND MEISTER ECKHART**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Office of Graduate Studies**

**San Jose State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**in**

**Interdisciplinary Studies**

**by**

**Jui-yin Caroline Kao**

**August, 1996**

**UMI Number: 1381423**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **RETURNING HOME: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ZHUANG ZI AND MEISTER ECKHART**

by

**Jui-yin Caroline Kao**

This thesis is a work in comparative mysticism. It compares ideas and insights in writings attributed to two mystics, one Daoist and one Christian, who were widely separated in time and space: Master Zhuang, from China of the 3rd and 4th centuries BCE, and Meister Eckhart, from Europe of the 13th and 14th centuries CE. Each is a major figure for his time and place. Indeed, Zhuang is the most influential figure from pre-Buddhist China for the development of Daoist as well as Buddhist mysticism in later Chinese history. Eckhart is among the leading figures in Christian mysticism, for some the quintessential mystic in the entire history of Christianity. Because these are not obscure figures, but key representatives of their traditions, the striking similarities between them in the areas studied—linguistic skepticism, the description of Ultimacy, and ways of living in relation to Ultimacy—support claims that have been made about the universal qualities of mystical experiences in world religions.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people deserve to be thanked for their help and support in making this thesis possible. At San Jose State, I would like to thank my graduate advisory committee, Drs. M. Lou Lewandowski, Kenneth Kramer, and Chris Jochim. Dr. Lewandowski has been a mentor for me over the past few years. I would like to express my gratitude for her warm enthusiasm and support in the writing of this thesis. I would like to thank Dr. Jochim for his comments on the Introduction, and especially on Chapter Two and Chapter Five, which deal with aspects of Chinese mysticism. I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to Dr. Kenneth Kramer for his enthusiasm and constant support. This thesis grew out of a discussion with Dr. Kenneth Kramer and Dr. Jochim; they believed in this thesis from the beginning. The opportunity to work with Dr. Jochim and Dr. Kramer has been one of the greatest experiences of my life, and I thank them for their insights, support, and inspiration.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Tim Wadkins for his initial guidance in studying Christian Mysticism; and to give special thanks to Dr. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Dr. Jonathan Herman for their encouragement and support. It is impossible to list all of my friends who inspired me directly or indirectly. I owe my debt of gratitude to all the writers and translators in the bibliography; they are all my teachers.

I would like to express my gratitude to Professors Ivor Shepherd, David Decker and Paul Harwood of Tunghai University, Taiwan. My family and many friends have walked with me all the way here; my gratitude is beyond words. May God bless them!

**DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS:**

**LIAN-GUEI KAO 1907-1981  
WU-YEN KAO 1921-**

**FOR THEIR LOVE, THEIR SORROW AND PERSEVERANCE**

**MAY GOD BLESS OUR BELOVED HOMELAND:**

**Formosa Taiwan**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Is mystical experience in fact one and the same for all in  
its essential structure and function, or are there  
irreducibly plural forms of mystical experience?*

*(Woods 3)*

The twenty-first century will offer a new opportunity for the East and the West to meet and to share a common spiritual heritage. As a Chinese student in the United States, my intention is to help form a bridge between the Western and Eastern religious traditions. It is my belief that mysticism is the highest expression of religious experience, and that mystics appeal to the ultimate truth within and beyond their mundane existence. Mystics provide us with a common ground for communication. It was D. T. Suzuki, in his book Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist, who first called my attention to the affinity of Meister Eckhart's thought and teaching to that of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. For Suzuki, Meister Eckhart is one of few Western thinkers able to share ideas and experiences with the Chan tradition.

Chan, which is well-known for its characteristic teaching of "emptiness" and its emphasis on simplicity and spontaneity, is a product of Chinese spirituality as it emerged after a long process of integration with Indian Mahayana Buddhism. As many scholars have noted, one spiritual source of Chan Buddhism was the Daoist thought of Master Zhuang in the fourth century B.C.E. The essence of Master Zhuang's wit and spontaneity is expressed in the book called *Zhuang Zi*

(Chuang Tzu), which also contains various followers' interpretations of his ideas.

In this work, I will compare Meister Eckhart's thought to that of *Zhuang Zi*. The purpose of my study will be to contribute to communication and understanding between two great spiritual traditions—Daoist and Christian—and to articulate the grounds for their mutual cross-cultural understanding.

### The Goal of Study and Method of Approach

It is my goal in this study to help build a bridge between two religious traditions—Daoist and Christian—and to articulate the grounds for East-West cultural studies. Toward this end, my method of approach has been influenced by the example set by Lee Yearley in his study, *Mencius and Aquinas*. In this work, Yearley outlines a method of "analogical prediction" for comparative studies in the philosophy of religions, in which the scholar strives to "articulate similarities-in-differences and differences-in similarities" between texts.

Yearley suggests we go beyond univocal or equivocal comparisons of terms and concepts, and recognize the major linguistic and conceptual differences in substantially different cultures and figures. To this end, Yearley analyzes "focal" and "secondary" meanings. He urges us to recognize that we are dealing with levels of meaning that are systematically related in the original language, and which in translation are, in turn, drawn from the interpreter's home discourse (Yearley 188-196). By following the guidelines of setting focal and secondary terms, I am able to focus on their meaning and to draw "real but thin" resemblances between Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart. The following



statement by Yearley concerning the analogical imagination and the comparative philosophy of religions is significant and helpful for this work.

I think it is clear that comparative studies of human flourishings must engage in a process that necessarily involves us in a form of imagining, in the utilization of the analogical imagination. To say we must use the imagination is not also to say that standards dissolve; it is not to join forces with some of the more radical forms of humanistic scholarship. Imaginative processes involve standards for judging interpretations and rules that can be followed well or badly. (Yearley 1990:197)

Indeed, the analogical imagination is involved deeply with the comparison models used in this work. They are products of evocative kinds of inventions which are formed personally. So, the comparative study of Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart can be fulfilled in a "Happy Wandering" way.

In a larger sense, the linguistic and structural differences in the style and orientation of discourse in the two thinkers must also be dealt with. Eckhart's use of logic and theological discourse is in marked contrast to Master Zhuang's use of parable, paradox and humor. The most cursory reading of the two thinkers reveals that Eckhart is offering serious theological discourses, even when he, too, engages in paradox and the negation of orthodox teaching. Zhuang Zi, on the other hand, is always "at play" in the sense of wandering freely among ideas and experiences.

The object of this study is not to underscore these manifest differences, but to look beyond them to find the much more interesting similarities in their thinking.

In addition to standard English translations of *Zhuang Zi* and the works of Meister Eckhart, I will consult secondary works on their thought in English and, for Master Zhuang, in Chinese. Therefore, it is my goal not only to develop a dialogue between them, but also between many other writers or critics who have studied *Zhuang Zi* and the works of Eckhart.

Since revelatory experiences are always personal, it is difficult to substantiate the content of a mystic's knowledge. By letting their thoughts permeate us, however, we are able to enter imaginatively into the worlds of Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart. Although this is not the same as living out their experiences, it broadens the horizons of them as mystics.

In the study of comparative religion, a key issue is whether mystical experiences are essentially one and the same, or are unique and incomparably different in every case. By careful analogy and analysis, it is my plan in this work to draw out the significant differences and to explicate the remaining similarities between the ideas of Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart.

As for the structure of the thesis, I propose to concentrate on three areas in the thought of Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart: first, their approach to the usage of language; second, their understanding and concepts of Ultimacy; and third, their views on the arts of life (for *Zhuang Zi*), or on the perfection of life (for Eckhart), which is correlated to the relationship between Ultimacy and

humans. In my conclusion, their methods of spiritual practice will be discussed, which are related to "Returning to Being" for Eckhart, and "Returning to True Nature" for Zhuang.

### Meister Eckhart and His World

Meister Johanne Eckhart (1260-1328) was a Dominican mystic who gained renown as a teacher, thinker and preacher in the Christian culture of the High Middle Ages. He had attained a high position within his order, and he was known as a man of great devotion. One night, while intently praying to the invisible God, his mind suddenly became clear and bright, and his spirit became perfectly still. In that moment of perfect stillness, he experienced a unity with God that Christians call "the vision of God." After that day, he attempted to share his experience with others, and to bring forth this mystical experience to humankind in his own way.

Meister Eckhart, without a doubt, desired to remain an orthodox Christian. He, like many other mystics, felt he had seen the ineffable truth of all existence and had become enlightened as to the nature of the supreme being. This revelation was so exciting, so wonderful, and so liberating to his mortal mind, that even if no one else in the world understood it, he wished it to be told. However, Eckhart met with two difficulties: he had to conquer the obstacle of language to convey an indescribable experience, and he had to confront the stone wall of church doctrine, a doctrine that by his vocation he was sworn to defend. Now he found that, if he were to speak faithfully of his beliefs, he would have to shatter that edifice.

For Eckhart, God and he were one in the act of knowing; he had found himself united with God's essential being. The truth he had known and of which he was eager to speak was the same truth, he felt, that Jesus had seen and of which he had spoken. Over the centuries, the teachings of Jesus regarding his identity with "the Father" had been construed as a doctrine relating to him alone and not applicable to all people. And so, ironically, when Meister Eckhart taught his interpretation of the message of Jesus regarding the identity of the human soul and God, his message was received with horror and was judged by the church authorities to be heretical.

On March 27, 1329, Pope John XXII issued the Bull *In agro dominico* condemning twenty-eight propositions drawn from the works of Meister Eckhart as either heretical or suspected of heresy. As in so many cases of theological condemnation in the middle ages, we know something about Eckhart's trial, but not nearly enough; many important documents have not survived. At best, we know that the primary investigation of Eckhart's case started in late 1325 or early 1326.<sup>1</sup> By the 1320s, Meister Eckhart was one of the most famous Dominicans in Germany. He was a former Paris Master, Prior of Erfurt, Provincial of Saxony, Vicar-General of Thuringia and later of Bohemia, and presently magister in the Dominican studium at Cologne. If Eckhart had been less successful, the charges probably would not have been made against him. From the remarks made by him

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<sup>1</sup> See Eckhart's "Condemnation Reconsidered" (McGinn, 1980).

and his supporters, it is probable that Eckhart's success attracted a great deal of envious attack. Thus, behind the proceedings against him there were both political and theological motives.

In the spring of 1327, accompanied by several other Dominicans, Eckhart departed for Avignon to defend himself. He probably remained there, if not under duress, then not free to depart from the Curia until final judgement had been passed. In defending himself, Eckhart did not deny the extracts drawn from his works, nor did he admit to teaching false deification. In his mind, the dispute was over which hermeneutical principles should be used to penetrate the teaching intention of the extracts. Eckhart scholar Edmund Colledge wrote about Eckhart's attitude during the trial, as follows:

We may ask why he did not show himself more able in his own defense. The answer seems to lie alike in his qualities and in his defects. He seems at no time, at Cologne or at Avignon, to have recognized that he was in any position of danger. All his writings, and all that we are told of his conduct, convey to us the impression of a man of great probity, *integer vitae scelerisque purus*, quite unafraid of what others could do to him. (Colledge 251)

From the above passage, it is easy to understand that Eckhart dealt with his trial in accord with his basic teaching, which describes a loss of origin, a denial of self benefit, and a spiritual poverty or emptiness that allows God to pour Himself into the soul.

While Eckhart's death was referred to in a letter written by Pope John XXII to the archbishop of Cologne (April 30, 1328), the exact date of his death is not mentioned. About Eckhart's final situation, Colledge offers some information,

When, on 27 March 1329, the constitution *In agro dominico* was at last promulgated, it contained the information that on his deathbed he made a declaration, similar to that of two years previous in Cologne, of faith and of willingness to retract what could be proved heretical. (Colledge 253)

#### Meister Eckhart's Writings

Eckhart preached extensively in both Latin and the German vernacular. The best critical edition of his Latin works, fifty-six sermons, some in several parts, was edited by Ernest Ben, Bruno Decker and Josef Koch (LW IV). The German language works were edited by J. Quint (DW).

There are several partial translations of Eckhart's works available for English readers. One is an Eckhart English language anthology called *Meister Eckhart, The Man From Whom God Nothing Hid*, edited by Ursula Fleming. Another English language source is *Breakthrough, Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*, edited by Matthew Fox. This book presents Eckhart's thought as "not a theoretical doctrine, but a practical guide," translating thirty-seven sermons with commentary by the editor (Fox 50).

In addition, there are two volumes of excellent English language studies based on both the Latin and the German originals. The first, *Meister Eckhart, The*

*Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, is translated and edited by Edmund Colledge, O. S. A. and Bernard McGinn. The second, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, is also edited by McGinn. These two books are the primary sources used in this thesis. They will be referred to throughout as, "*Essential*," and "*Teacher*," respectively. Another good translation, which D. T. Suzuki studied, is *Meister Eckhart, a Modern Translation*, written by Raymond Blakney. The two most useful introductions to Eckhart are Robert K. C. Forman's *Meister Eckhart, Mystic as Theologian*, which argues that Eckhart taught a serial program of spiritual practice, and Frank Tobin's *Meister Eckhart, Thought and Language*, which discusses the nature of Eckhart's language and introduces the characteristic themes of Eckhart's thinking. There are only a few articles comparing Eckhart to other thinkers: for example, Stephen Ozment's "Eckhart and Luther, German Mysticism and Protestantism" and Otto Folberth's "Meister Eckhart und Lao-tse Ein Vergleich Zweier Mystiker."

Eckhart seems to have been an extraordinary Christian. When reading his teachings on "God" and "Godhead," one senses that his description of a unitive reality is not the mere product of a speculative theology, but rather a directly perceived object for one who has actually "seen" and experienced it. Throughout his sermons and treatises, Eckhart's ideas expounded closely approach Chan Buddhist thought. Eckhart's experiences and testimony reconfirm my belief that mystical experience is universal, and is limited to no one cultural or religious

tradition. We can explore more of this common ground by turning now to Master Zhuang.

### Master Zhuang and His World

*Zhuang Zi* (as transliterated in the pinyin method of romanization) is the name for both the traditional sinological transcription of the name of the putative author, and of the title of his major work *Zhuang Zi*. "Chuang Tzu" is simply the transliteration according to the earlier Wade-Giles system, which is being steadily replaced in scholarly writing by the more modern pinyin method.

"Zhuang" is the surname of the supposed author of this special book, and "Zi" simply means "master" in the sense of a leading figure in a given school of thought in ancient China. So, it is appropriate to render "*Zhuang Zi*" as "Master Zhuang." The Chinese characters for all terms used appear in an appendix to this thesis.

Master Zhuang (ca. 360-280 B.C.E.), whose given name was Zhou, was a contemporary of the Confucian Master Meng (Mencius) in the Warring States period. Intellectually, the Warring States period was arguably the most exciting and active time in all of Chinese history. Peripatetic philosophers wandered throughout the land trying to sell their ideas to any willing ruler. It is not too much to say that most of China's great schools of philosophy were established during this period, and that the accomplishments of its thinkers correspond to those of the classical period of Greek philosophy.



According to the account in *Shiji* ("The Grand Scribe's Records") written by the great historian Sima Qian, Zhuang Zhou was a native of a place called Meng, now a part of Shang Qiu Xian in northern Henan province. He is said to have once served as a minor functionary at Lacquer Garden (Qi Yuan). Meng belongs to the state of Song, and many of the citizens of Song were descended from the early Shang people. The Shang people were artistic in nature, and believed very strongly in ghosts and spirits; their culture was characterized by a vivid mystical and aesthetic essence. This perhaps explains why Confucius and Mencius, who came from the Northern people of the Zhou, emphasized much more the pragmatic aspects of life, such as politics and moral teachings. Master Zhuang, bearing within himself the mystical influence of the Shang people, asserted a more metaphysical aspect of human nature—the struggle to set free the true self.

In addition to the political disruption and the social chaos of the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.E.), Zhuang and his people also suffered from the brutal, tyrannical rule of the King Kang of Song. Viewing the threat from this tyrant as too close for safety, Master Zhuang traveled to the state of Chu in South China.

What we know about Master Zhuang's personal life is very limited. According to anecdotes in the later chapters of *Zhuang Zi* and to the legends that have grown up around him, it would appear that Master Zhuang was a highly spiritual person who did not seek riches and social status. Although he was poor,

he rejected the job of Prime Minister offered by King Wei of Chu out of concern for his personal and intellectual freedom, saying he was as "happy as a turtle who drags its tail and plays in the mud." Master Zhuang, who is said to have worn ragged clothes and to have tied his shoes together with string, satirized those intellectuals who chased after fame and fortune, and by no means considered himself as miserable or unfortunate. Master Zhuang said that he was so rich that he could decorate his coffin with stars and moon, as others did with jades and pearl. He was a man of such unconventional wisdom that he could hide all his treasures in the world without worrying who would steal them away.

#### *Zhuang Zi* and Related Literature

The current edition of *Zhuang Zi*, compiled with commentary by Guo Xiang, has thirty-three chapters. It is divided into three parts, the Inner Chapters (1-7), the Outer Chapters (8-22), and the Miscellaneous Chapters (23-33). The Inner Chapters are considered by the majority of scholars to best reflect the thought of Master Zhuang. Chapters 16-27 are thought to represent the ideas of later members of Master Zhuang's school. However, there is no trustworthy method for firmly identifying the authentic author or authors of the book.<sup>2</sup> *Zhuang Zi* is thus a very heterogeneous work that does not speak with a single voice. There is a growing consensus that tends to attribute the Inner Chapters to

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<sup>2</sup> See "How Much of Chuang-Tzu Did Chuang-Tzu Write" (in Graham, 1986).

Master Zhuang himself, so most of this study is based on the first seven chapters, using the other chapters only for auxiliary reference.

Victor H. Mair's translation of *Zhuang Zi* is the primary English language source for this study. It proves much easier to locate a particular passage of the work in Mair's *Wandering on the Way* than in Graham's difficult reconstruction of the text. Moreover, in comparing the Watson and Mair translations, significant differences in style are found. Mair's translation is more exquisite, while Watson uses too strongly didactic a tone.

It is also worth noting the time sequence of publication. Watson's book was first published in 1968, Mair's in 1994, a time span that has brought us more understanding of *Zhuang Zi*. The literal meaning and figurative suggestions in the original text are much more closely rendered in recent translations. It is heartening that we should see many more scholars in the West accomplished in reading the Chinese classics.

Compared to traditional Chinese readers, modern scholars are at greater liberty to make up their own minds about how to approach *Zhuang Zi*. A. C. Graham's work of *Zhuang Zi* is one example. His model is very helpful from the standpoint of philosophical history. It is now widely understood that there were many schools and authors involved in the completion of *Zhuang Zi*. However, philosophy, as expressed in *Zhuang Zi*, transcends the ordinary connotations of the word "philosophy." *Zhuang Zi* is unlike a typical modern philosophical work, such as Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. Pure logic is something

Master Zhuang and his school would prefer to avoid, or at least depart from to a degree that one can forget one's "thing-thinking" mind.

For centuries, the spiritual force of *Zhuang Zi*, which asks for a sublimation of both desire and spirit, has motivated Chinese readers to the Dao (way) of self-transformation. The classical interpretation of the text is that it is a representation of a great "Chinese soul" in which many different souls are joined together. The compilation work undoubtedly cost great effort and wisdom. When we read it as a product of "group wisdom," details should not be neglected, but more attention should be given to the power of the author's original purpose. *Zhuang Zi* is not only a book of thought, but also a record and program of regular spiritual practice. Jonathan Herman put it well when he referred to Martin Buber's interpretive premise that the *Zhuang Zi* is a poetic parable—an ordered presentation of "the teaching" (*die Lehre*). Herman comments:

Here, Buber has completely redirected the locus of meaning, though he is still ultimately true to the issue of reconstruction. The original intent, the original purpose, according to Buber, is to facilitate transformation and human completion; the "interpretation" is thus the spiritual transformation of the reader. (Herman 13)

References in the form "(4/2/25)" are, respectively, to the page, chapter, and line of the text of *Zhuang Zi* found in *A Concordance to Chuang-tzu*, a volume in the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20 (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1956). Those in the form

"(Mair 58)" are to the page number in Victor H. Mair's translation *Wandering on the Way* (New York, Bantam Books, 1994). It would be impractical to list all the commentaries I have consulted, but one work has been of particular assistance to me, the modern Chinese translation by Jing-Hong Huang, *Xinyi Zhuang Zi Duben* (Taipei, 1974).

Three other works on the philosophy of Zhuang Zi must be credited here, *Chuang Tzu, World Philosopher at Play* by Kuang-Ming Wu (New York, Scholars Press, 1982); *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu* (The University of Hawaii Press, 1983), a collection of essays edited by Victor H. Mair; and *Zhuang Zi de Shengming Zhexue* by Haiyan Yan, a study of Master Zhuang's philosophy of life.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Linguistic Skepticism<sup>3</sup>

*Much speech leads inevitably to silence.*

*Better to hold fast to the void.*

*(Lao Zi, trans. in Lau 61)*

Both Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart were excellent writers. Master Zhuang's poetic prose and playful style have been considered most influential in Chinese literary history. In a different way, Eckhart played an important role in the High German language; he not only created new vocabulary but also used new words to present a cogent and original view of Christianity. In style, Master Zhuang is vagrant and frivolous, while Meister Eckhart is eloquent but peaceful. Although they both have much to say about Ultimacy (Dao for Zhuang, Godhead for Eckhart) and the relationship between the Ultimate and the human, they nonetheless remind us of the limits of our existing systems of language. For the mystic, truth is always beyond the structures of words. In a passage where Master Zhuang has been seeking a friend, he says with a witty sense of sorrow:

Words are for catching ideas; once you've caught the idea, you can forget about the words. Where can I find a person who knows how

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<sup>3</sup> For strong points of view on different aspects of the issue, see P. J. Ivanhoe, "Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Dao" (Ivanhoe, 1993). Paul Kjellberg has a thorough account of Zhuangzi and Skepticism in his Ph.D. dissertation.

to forget about words so that I can have a few words with him?

(75/26/48-49; Mair 277)

Master Zhuang produced one story after another, always making his points indirectly. Once the meaning is evoked, he seems to say, we can throw the words away. He is playful and vivacious in creating new and excellent expressions; his effulgent use of language enables him to wander among many possible literary situations. It is easy to miss his true intention by reading *Zhuang Zi* literally, however. Kuang-ming Wu, in his book *Chuang Tzu, World Philosopher At Play*, spends an entire chapter explaining that *Zhuang Zi* should not be read as cognitive literalism but as metaphorical evocation (Wu 29-59).

Philip Ivanhoe also presents an explicit discussion of Zhuang Zi's linguistic skepticism. Ivanhoe distinguishes between logical or philosophical skepticism and linguistic skepticism, which is the doubting of language as a vehicle for truth. Since human language systems are inherently limited to the mode of conventional views and logical thoughts, Master Zhuang was skeptical of the scheming human intellect and about the power of language, not of the possibility of experiencing truth. In this sense, Zhuang was not a skeptic or relativist, "[H]e has a wordless, unwavering faith in his Way" (Ivanhoe 1993:652).

*Zhuang Zi* and Eckhart both agree that language is somehow inadequate for expressing certain aspects of reality. An understanding of Master Zhuang's and Eckhart's attitudes towards language should better enable us to comprehend their use of it. Meister Eckhart often asserts that we cannot know what God is. He says

not only that we cannot know Him intellectually, but that our words are doomed to utter inadequacy in trying to express anything about God. He is extremely dubious of the ability of language to express what is truly important. This concern made him very distinct among the preachers of the day, who typically used scholastic language and logic to present theology.

Meister Eckhart's rhetorical and poetic devices are surprisingly similar to Master Zhuang's, although their styles are very different. Beyond their mutual criticism of language, there is a different emphasis. Master Zhuang emphasized the use of unstructured intuition instead of the "crafty mind" (*ji xin*). For him, not only the approach to Dao but also the comprehension of Dao is beyond the capacity of language. Since our intuitive understanding of Dao is beyond sensory expression or logical ways of thinking, even Master Zhuang himself could never tell us exactly what the Dao is. In contrast, Meister Eckhart emphasized specific experiences of the divine; his mysticism is experiential in method. Once he said:

Whoever does not understand what I have said, let him not burden his heart with it; for as long as a man is not equal to this truth, he will not understand these words, for this is a truth beyond speculation that has come immediately from the heart of God.

*(Essential 203)*

A man who is "not equal to this truth" is someone who has not experienced truth or has not gained the necessary spiritual insight through his relationship with



God. Since this truth comes directly from "the heart of God," we can only attain it through our direct experience of the divine.

Another interesting similarity between the two thinkers is that both Master Zhuang and Eckhart, in order to find the fullest usage of their words, tend to use paradoxical expressions and negative language to express their ideas. These two elements play important roles in constituting the characteristics of both masters' use of language. Let us review these two aspects in further detail.

#### Paradoxical Expressions and Negative Language

Because of the ineffable nature of his experience, the mystic finds it difficult to formulate or communicate it by language. The experience can only be explored to the extent that it can be fit into what are already structured concepts and modes of expression. To balance between the truth revealed in the mystics' experiences and the well-established frame of existing language, the mystic may choose to use some paradoxical ways to express his insight. If paradox can be etymologically defined as a statement opposite to the common logic, both Zhuang Zi and Eckhart have a penchant for using paradox to break through conventional logic.

The first level of paradoxical expression is the simple reversal of common sense, to illustrate a deeper truth. We see this in the following story of Wonton told by Zhuang Zi:

The emperor of the Southern Sea was Lickety, the emperor of the Northern Sea was Split, and the emperor of the Center was

Wonton. Lickety and Split often met each other in the land of Wonton, and Wonton treated them very well. Wanting to repay Wonton's kindness, Lickety and Split said, "All people have seven holes for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. Wonton alone lacks them. Let's try boring some holes for him." So every day they bored one hole, and on the seventh day Wonton died. (21/7/33-35; Mair 71)

Wonton's nature is evidently beyond the physical plane, since his body is without the usual holes of the sensory organs. His friends want to bore holes in him to perfect his body, but trying to improve him, they accidentally kill him. They could not understand that Wonton was perfect even though he did not fit the conventional form of the physical body. In their ignorance and haste, they destroy that which is beyond their understanding.

Both the story and the statement cancel out conventional analytic thinking and subliminally evoke a unifying awareness through nondualistic thought. We understand the paradoxical significance through the story's metaphor of the body and its death. In "The Function of Paradox in Mystical Discourse," Joseph Keller explains that, "We know what a sentence means not only because we decode it, but because in a sense we've already 'been there.' Schemas or traces of schemas previously constructed from experience are reconstructed under the stimulus of the new sentence, and we recognize what it 'means'" (Keller 6). The simplest

paradox urges us to break through the illusion of our rational analytical modes of thing-thinking, and brings us back to “where we were before we were”—borrowing Eckhart's expression.

A central problem in the history of mysticism has been the difficulty of using language to convey knowledge of the divine or Dao, which surpasses all descriptive and analytic capacity. The eternal life of the soul somehow has nothing to do with our life of physical body. It is paradox that sharply challenges our conventional way of thinking.

In a higher level of paradox, negation may be used to convey the inexpressible nature of God. Eckhart says that every comparison is a form of likeness, yet there is no likeness or comparison between God and His creatures. Comparison implies that there are at least two things existing, and that they are distinct. In giving preference to the negative expression, Eckhart is stressing how weak and inadequate philosophical concepts are in man's attempt to understand God and man's relationship to him. At least in words, we know more accurately what God is not, than what he is. Sometimes Eckhart calls God a nothing, in the sense that a perfect unity is not a distinct thing. One is, therefore, a negation of negation, and a denial of denial. What does one mean? One means something to which nothing has been added. Eckhart explains:

But God has a negation of negation; he is one and negates everything other, for outside of God is nothing . . . . By negating something of God—say, I negate goodness of him (of course, I

cannot really negate anything of him)—by negating something of God, I catch hold of something that he is not. It is precisely this that has to be removed. God is one, he is a negation of negation.

(*Teacher 281*)

Master Zhuang also chose to use some abnegative notions to describe the ideal state of the human mind, such as "emptiness" (*xu*), "stupidity" (*yü*), "renunciation of learning" (*qi xue*), "[becoming like] a withered tree and dead ashes" (*gao mu shi hui*). In the following passage, he uses five negations in order to indicate the right direction of Dao practice,

The Great Way is ineffable, great disputation is speechless, great humaneness is inhumane, great honesty is immodest, and great bravery is not aggressive. The way that displays itself is not the Way. Speech that is disputatious fails to achieve its aims. Humaneness that is constant cannot go around. Honesty that is aloof will not be trusted. Bravery that is aggressive will not succeed. One who does not abandon these five precepts will be more or less headed in the right direction. (5/2/58-60; Mair 19)

*Zhuang Zi* uses the five negations, all of which are paradoxical, to remove the spurious surface meaning of the great way, the great disputation, the great humaneness, the great honesty, and the great bravery. Only after getting rid of their external appearance, the original features of these five principles can be revealed to us. Moreover, Master Zhuang praises the ability to "know" or to

“recognize” the knowledge of not knowing (*zhi bu zhi zhi zhi*), which is similar to what Socrates meant when he said, “I know that I am wiser in this, that I know that I do not know.” Both *Zhuang Zi* and Eckhart have parallel views about the way to know the Ultimate, which for them is a *via negativa*. As to whether there is a True Lord (*Zhen Jun*) existing in our world, *Zhuang Zi* explicitly says that he does not know and cannot know the answer. Perhaps this knowledge of “not knowing” sheds some light on the mystery of why the mystics are so poetic, and speak of their experiences in such negative and paradoxical ways.

In summary, both Eckhart and *Zhuang Zi* were not reticent in speaking about their ultimate concerns, and about men's relationship with Godhead or Dao. If the purpose of Eckhart's speech is conversion (for he was a priest), then for *Zhuang Zi*, perhaps his real purpose was to satisfy his inner urge to express himself in a kind of “piping” of his heart. Although the two masters' social roles and purposes of speech were very different, it is intriguing to note the similarities in their discourse. After we understand their approach to the usage of language, we can begin looking into the Dao-way of Master *Zhuang* and the way toward divinization of Master Eckhart.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Zhuang Zi's Tian-Di and Dao

The concept of Tian in *Zhuang Zi* contains three levels of meaning, which are all related to Nature, but we can find some differences through closer examination. Tian first of all stands for Mother Nature, which is generated by Dao. Second, it stands for the creative power behind the natural development of things. Third, *Zhuang Zi* also believes Tian means the principle of nature, which follows Dao. Tian and Dao are thus different terms, but sometimes they can merge together, as when *Zhuang Zi* simply uses the term "Tian-Dao," which can be translated as "the principle of Tian."

#### Master Zhuang's Remarks on Tian (Heaven) and Tian-Di (Heaven and Earth)

Tian as nature. Tian (Heaven) and Tian-Di (Heaven and Earth), as collective nouns, both stand for Mother Nature. Tian as an adjective means "natural," but Tian as a noun means nature in general, the nature of the "ten thousand things" and the universe as a whole. According to *Zhuang Zi*, there is no end or beginning in this universe for either space or time. If time has two directions, then future and the past are limitless. Thus we read, "Things in all of their dying and living, their squareness and roundness, know not their roots, yet surely they have existed for all eternity in their ubiquitousness" (58/22/18-19; Mair 213).

*Zhuang Zi* points out that there is no absolute distinction between the big

and small, young and old, or beautiful and ugly in this universe. Instead, he provides us with a relativistic perspective, as in the following:

There is nothing under Heaven larger than the tip of a downy hair at the end of autumn, but Mount T'ai is small. There is no greater longevity than that of a child who dies in infancy, but Progenitor Peng died young. Heaven and Earth were born together with me and the myriad things are one with me. (5/2/51-53; Mair 18)

From the perspective of this limitless and relativistic universe, the ten thousand things are equal. We human beings are unique in that our attitude towards nature adversely affects, or even ruins it. Master Zhuang uses "Tian" to mean what is natural, as opposed to what results from human actions. He even strongly urges us to return to Nature, what he calls "Tian," the natural. The following passage reflects a perspective unlike that of modern efforts to protect the natural environment through intervention. Zhuang states:

Oxen and horses having four feet is what is meant by "Heavenly." Putting a halter over a horse's head or piercing on ox's nose is what is meant by "human." Therefore it is said, "Do not destroy the Heavenly with the human; do not destroy destiny with intentionality; do not sacrifice your good name for attainments." If you guard this carefully and do not lose it, you may be said to have returned to the truth. (44/17/51-53; Mair 159)

Zhuang Zi's return to the truth is based on an attitude of appreciation of nature

and on the avoidance of any unnecessary human doings. We are not meant to "use" the things Nature has produced. The human spirit that Master Zhuang praises is a meandering among natural things that he calls the mind of "Heaven joined to Heaven." He calls us not to change or dominate nature. He is against the dominating mindset that distracts us from the Way, so he advises us not to "assist Heaven with the human." We should allow nature to remain as it was originally generated by the Dao.

Tian and Tian-Di as the source of creative power. When used to mean the source of creative power, Tian (Heaven) always is connected with Di (the Earth). Tian-Di provides the space in which the myriad things exist, as well as the source of their creative power. For Master Zhuang, Heaven and Earth are like our two parents.

- (a) The Way gives him an appearance and Heaven gives him a form (14/5/56; Mair 49).
- (b) Heaven and Earth are the father and mother of the myriad things. (48/19/6; Mair 175)

In passage (a), the phrase "Heaven gives him a form" implies that Heaven (Tian) acts as creator, though it is unnecessary to interpret "Heaven" here as a personal deity. Passage (b) reminds us that Heaven and Earth are the sustaining force of all that exists, like two parents who bear and nurture their children. However, *Zhuang Zi's* Heaven as creator is not like the Creator in Christianity, who created



all things *ex nihilo*.

To understand Master Zhuang's views on Heaven as the creative power, we must look at what he says about Qi (vital breath; life force). Master Zhuang presents a unique theory of the transformation of Qi in the ten thousand things. We are told that the essence of Tian-Di is composed of yin and yang, which are the two reciprocal elements of Qi. The changes of Qi cause the transformation of creatures, and all the different kinds of living things are nothing but changes of Qi. Thus, from the perspective of Tian, since they all contain elements of Qi, the myriad things are equal. For *Zhuang Zi*, Qi is self-existent and dynamic at the same time. The creative and sustaining power of Qi works in tandem with the Dao to give spirit to life.

Qi is not only a physical element but also a spiritual substance, and provides the basis for *Zhuang Zi*'s ideal way of life, namely a happy wandering in the universe. On this subject we read, "They're about to become companions of the Creator of things, and wander in the unity of the vital breath (Qi) that joins Heaven and Earth" (18/6/67-68; Mair 60). The purposelessness of creation is manifest in the self-transformation of Qi, which is natural and changeful. *Zhuang Zi* explains this metaphorically as follows:

The life of things

Is like the cantering and galloping of a horse—

They are transformed with each movement,

They change with each moment.

What are you to do?

What are you not to do?

Just let things evolve by themselves. (44/17/46-47; Mair 158)

For Master Zhuang, Tian and Di are analogous to Yang and Yin. Each pair is like our parents, and they are each equally important for all creatures. He explains why giving greater importance to one or the other would be wrong, "It [one-sided emphasis] would be like making Heaven your teacher and ignoring Earth, like making yin your teacher and ignoring yang. The unworkability of this is clear" (43/17/38-39; Mair 156). This would be unworkable because the two forces are inextricably intertwined, and would be out of balance without their mutual influence. In summary, Tian is the source of creation; it is manifest in the transformations of Qi and immanent in everything in the universe.

Tian as the principle of nature. Tian, for *Zhuang Zi*, also has a meaning in which it represents the Principle of Nature analogous to Dao (the Way) itself. Thus, he often uses "Tian" to indicate the Principle of Nature that should be followed by people, as in these examples:

- (a) For this reason, the sage does not subscribe to [the view of absolute opposites] but sees things in the light of nature, accepting "this" for what it is (4/2/29; Mair 15).
- (b) He rids himself of knowledge and precedent, conforming to the principle of Heaven (40/15/11-12; Mair 145).
- (c) The Way of purity and plainness lies only in guarding the spirit.

Guard and do not lose it, becoming one with the spirit. The essence of oneness will pervade and join with the order of Heaven (41/15/19-20; Mair 146-147).

All the above teachings begin from the assumption that Heaven is a pervasive principle communicant with Dao. Passage (a) connects man's constant nature with the superior light of Heaven. Passage (b) points out that we no longer need conventional knowledge after we follow the principle of Heaven. Passage (c) indicates that our pure nature can become one with the spirit (of Heaven), so that we are able to join the order of Heaven.

In summary, for Master Zhuang, Tian has manifold meanings. It can be nature, or the universe in general, or the dynamic power which moves the myriad things, or a great principle within Nature for us to emulate and follow. Furthermore, it can be immanent and transcendental simultaneously in relation to the physical world. According to Master Zhuang, Tian is the teacher/companion of the sages in their highest state, which is ineffable. Master Zhuang says:

He who is inwardly direct is a disciple of Heaven. The disciple of Heaven realizes that the son of Heaven and himself are both born of Heaven. So why should he expect that others will either approve or disapprove of his words? One who is like this will be viewed by others as an innocent child. This is what I mean by being a disciple of Heaven. (9/4/18-20; Mair 31)

We cannot be sure whether *Zhuang Zi* intends to use "Tian" to mean "Dao" in

such passages. He does not clarify which level of meaning he intends—and, as we know, the meanings of “Tian” in *Zhuang Zi* are complicated. In any case, each of the elements of Tian are unified in the whole, and Dao is the sum of its parts, Heaven and the Way. In further study of the meanings of “Dao,” we will have opportunities to see how the two concepts overlap and merge into one.

#### Master Zhuang's Remarks on Dao (the Way)

“Dao” for Master Zhuang is not only a philosophical concept, but also an actual substance hidden among all things and creatures. It is ineffable and shapeless, as Philip Ivanhoe explains:

*Zhuang Zi* said emphatically that the Dao can never be understood through the scheming human intellect; one must grasp it intuitively and one can do this through a fasting of the heart and mind and a process of forgetting the narrow and parochial views which society has inflicted upon us. (Ivanhoe 1993:653)

Although *Zhuang Zi* views Dao as ineffable, he often describes it, and we must try to make sense of what he says. No matter how inadequate human interpretations may be, they will not affect the true nature of Dao, which can be described in three aspects, which are each covered below.

Dao as the ineffable source of Tian-Di, the universe. There is general agreement among both of the seminal sources of Daoism, *Zhuang Zi* and *Lao Zi*, concerning the primary role of Dao in relation to Tian-Di or the whole created universe. *Lao Zi* explicitly places the Dao prior to Tian-Di in the order of being,

especially in the following two passages.

There is a thing confusedly formed,  
Born before Heaven and Earth.  
Silent and void  
It stands alone and does not change,  
Goes round and does not weary.  
It is capable of being the mother of the world.  
I know not its name  
So I style it 'the way.' (Chapter 25; Lau 82)

As a thing the way is  
Shadowy, indistinct.  
Indistinct and shadowy,  
Yet within it is an image;  
Shadowy and indistinct,  
Yet within it is a substance.  
Dim and dark,  
Yet within it is an essence.  
This essence is quite genuine.

And within it is something that can be tested.  
From the present back to antiquity

**Its name never deserted it.**

**It serves as a means for inspecting the fathers of the  
multitude. (Chapter 21; Lau 78)**

*Zhuang Zi* also characterizes Dao as ineffable and primal. "The Way cannot be heard, for what is heard is not the Way; the Way cannot be seen, for what is seen is not the Way; the Way cannot be spoken, for what is spoken is not the Way" (60/22/61-62; Mair 219). This passage may have been influenced by *Lao Zi*, as it is found in a chapter whose content is later in historical origin than the Inner Chapters. Nonetheless, *Zhuang Zi* made other explicit descriptions of Dao as ineffable. The following passage is often quoted by scholars because it expresses the paradoxical aspects of Dao as well as indicates its primal nature:

The way has attributes and evidence, but it has no action and no form. It may be transmitted but cannot be received. It may be apprehended but cannot be seen. From the root, from the stock, before there was Heaven or Earth, for all eternity truly has it existed. It inspirits demons and gods, gives birth to Heaven and Earth. It lies about the zenith but is not high; it lies beneath the nadir but is not deep. It is prior to Heaven and Earth, but it is not ancient, it is senior to high antiquity, but it is not old. (16/6/29-31; Mair 55)

Again, Master Zhuang expresses the ineffable and inexpressible in terms of paradox and negation, emphasizing the elusive and ineluctable aspects of Dao.

Dao as the source of the arts of creative living. The arts of Dao merge into our lives, as Dao sustains our lives up to the final stage of unification with Dao. We thus achieve the highest spiritual goal, which is "to become companions of the Creator of things, and wander in the unity of the vital breath (Qi) that joins Heaven and Earth" (18/6/67-68; Mair 60). This seems to sum up Master Zhuang's goal of life. Martin Buber has made an excellent observation on this meaning and unity of Dao:

We point out that Dao is in no way an explanation of the world, but rather that the entire meaning of being lies in the unity of the real life, can only be experienced by it, and that Dao is just this unity, taken as an absolute. (1991:93)

This meaning of Dao, as Buber implies, is not purely metaphysical, but communicates the fundamental essence of authentic existence. *Zhuang Zi* further explains, "Fish delight in water, and man delights in the Way . . . . Delighting in the Way, man's life is stabilized without ado" (18/6/72; Mair 61). The freedom of *Zhuang Zi's* goal of "happy wandering" (Xiaoyao You) is based on this meaning of Dao. "You" is synonymous with "fun," "playing around," or "roaming around." To work well is to play well, and vice versa. After being united with Dao, working is like playing and our world is bigger and freer than we originally perceived. In Master Zhuang's stories, one is free to turn down the job one is not interested in but is not advised to become a hermit who renounces the world. Instead, Zhuang praises the one who works through playing, who masters the arts of Dao and

receives joy and happiness as a result. The following passage from Kuang-ming Wu explains this well:

Chuang Tzu's [*Zhuang Zi's*] attitude to games is instructive. On the one hand, he took war to be a mere game. On the other hand, he took quite seriously such pastime avocations as catching cicadas, fishing, archery, hunting, horse racing, music, watching fish play, and bird watching. They all reveal what life is and how to live it. Serious occupations are treated playfully, and playing games is treated seriously. Life is "fun" in a serious sense. (Wu 1990:111)

In the higher context of the Dao, the relative seriousness or aimlessness of human avocations and amusements is irrelevant.

Dao as existing everywhere. From the viewpoint of Dao, there is no difference between noble and cheap, big and small, beauty and ugliness. Dao dwells in everything, and anything can be the center of Dao:

Master Easturb inquired of Master Chuang [*Zhuang*], saying,

"Where is the so-called Way present?"

"There's no place that it is not present," said Master Chuang.

"Give me an example so that I can get an idea," said Master Easturb.

"It's in ants," said Master Chuang.

"How can it be so low?"

"It's in panic grass."



"How can it be still lower?"

"It's in tiles and shards."

"How can it be still lower?"

"It's in shit and piss."

Master Easturb did not respond. (59/22/43-46; Mair 217)

Master Easturb could not reply because his thought was guided by the crafty mind which differentiates things based on habitual concepts. From the perspective of Dao, everything is equally precious, there is no high or low.

Indeed, for Master Zhuang, there is often no major difference between Tian and Dao on the metaphysical level. Sometimes they are different names for the same reality, but sometimes Dao clearly is more primal than "Tian" or "Tian-Di." This is a tendency seen in *Zhuang Zi*, but it is not a clear position, such as is found with Eckhart's distinction between Godhead and God. For Master Zhuang, both "Tian" and "Dao" refer to a natural entity, not a personified ruler. Dao is the principle of transformation within the ten thousand things in the universe; its operation and creativity are nothing but natural developments. If we need to give a name to *Zhuang Zi*'s cosmology, perhaps "pan-Daoism" is better than "pantheism," because he never intends to convey an anthropomorphic deity or God when using either "Tian" or "Dao." As we will see below, this impersonal quality also contrasts with Eckhart's theology.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Eckhart's God and Godhead

Almost everything we have from Eckhart is in some sense a commentary on the Bible, so it seems appropriate to regard him as an interpreter of Scripture, keeping in mind that his interpretations are unconventional. For Eckhart, there is a major difference between God and Godhead; the difference is like that between Earth and Heaven. To understand Eckhart's thought, let us begin with the definitions of God.

#### Eckhart's Definitions of God

God as existence (esse). God is Existence, and every act of existence comes from him. Everything that exists, whatever it is, is nothing without God, who is the source of existence. And we need to recognize God in all things because God is indeed in all things. He exists even in his creatures. So we are able to see, in Eckhart's words, "that God is everywhere, and from the fact that God is in everything created through power, presence, and essence, totally in each thing—totally within and totally without" (*Teacher* 95). We must not think that existence is less than totally in every being, or that only some part of existence is in each. Just as the soul is not corrupted when the hand is cut off, because the whole soul is in the hand in such a way that it is completely outside the hand, so is God in every created thing. God is not material. He is free from every imperfection that accompanies the property of matter. As we have said, God is existence itself. For Eckhart, "existence" is the first and most proper of all God's

names. Eckhart says that God is "all in all" and also that he "works all things in all," because "God is inside all things in that he is existence, and thus every being feeds on him. He is also on the outside because he is above all and thus outside all" (*Teacher* 179).

Therefore, everything is equal in God's presence. "Equality" is the most important essence for all the creatures in God's existence. Eckhart declares:

So therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of "God," and that we may apprehend and rejoice in that everlasting truth in which the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal—there where I was established, where I wanted what I was and was what I wanted.  
(*Essential* 200)

In other sermons, Eckhart states that the greatest blessing in Heaven and on Earth is based on "equality." No human beings can follow God completely without having an "equality" with God within themselves. Such a statement opens a bridge of communication between Eckhart and Zhuang Zi, but Eckhart's work was condemned as "heresy" for this very same assertion.

God as the intellect. God, the Truth Himself and the author of Scripture, comprehends, inspires and intends truth all at one time within His intellect. This intellect has been sown in the human soul and impressed upon it. Nothing is made by God without wisdom and intellect as its efficient cause. Quoting two Scriptural texts, Eckhart explains that "the Word, that is the ideas of things in

God, is immutable. And all created things are mutable" (*Essential* 141). Before an architect builds his house, he must have some idea of its appearance in his mind. According to Eckhart, Heaven and Earth are established by the Word of the Lord; that is, by the idea or design of God. "Heaven and Earth will pass away, my words will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). Heaven and Earth (all created things) will be changed, but the ideas of God will never cease to exist. Moreover, God understands the essence of the world truly and securely, just as an artist fully understands his own work, or an architect comprehends his own design.

God as love and compassion. God loves His creatures even before we are born and even when we become His enemies by our actions and evil intentions. However, if God exhibits wrath toward us, His anger comes only from love. Thus Eckhart says:

If it seems that he grows angry now and then because of sinfulness, this is not anger. It is love, for it comes from the great, divine love. He punishes those he loves, of course, for "he is the Love" (1 John 4:16) that is the Holy Spirit. (Fox 1991:330)

Eckhart's God has a nature of giving, offering us the divine gift, that is, Himself. The creation dwelling in God gives God immense pleasure. God's giving is not only a giving of himself but also a giving of consolation to humankind. And if God is given to consolation out of compassion, He must also suffer.

Eckhart's God is one who rejoices and one who suffers for the sake of some benefit that He has destined for us by this means. God not only rejoices

more than us, He suffers with us, and suffers for our sake through the love which He has for us. Matthew Fox has a comment on this compassionate God presented by Eckhart:

This capacity of Eckhart's God to suffer and to rejoice with humanity is what distinguished the biblical God from many Gods of the philosophers, as Rabbi Herschel points out. Eckhart's God, like Herschel's God, is a caring, passionate God. (Fox 1991:157)

Eckhart's God is in accord with the description of the Scripture, "God is love and whoever is in love is in God and God in him" (1 John 4:16). For Eckhart, God has such a great need for our friendship that He cannot wait until we ask for Him. He comes to us and asks us that we be His friends, for He desires that we should want it. He also wants to forgive us. This is the joyful God that Eckhart emphasizes—not a God of punishment but of friendship and compassion.

God as trinitarian—persons in the Godhead. Eckhart's concept of Trinity, without a doubt, remains Christian in its orthodoxy. However, he desires to regard this truth in an unorthodox way. The Father is the Principle of the whole divinity. The Father in the Godhead is the being who is not from another. God is the first Cause and He gives all things being. He is the source and Principle of all emanation into the world. The Father and the Son are the same in nature, both kind and understanding. Indeed, what the Father gives the Son is something greater than what He gives all others, He gives him existence. The Father is, therefore, first Person in the Godhead. In the Godhead, the Son is from another,

but the Father is not from another. The Father is owed love, therefore, as shown when we do divine works through love as His children, rather than through fear as slaves (*Teacher* 188-193).

The Son comes from Philos, the spirit of love. For Eckhart, the Son or Word is the same as the Father or Principle. Jesus is the Word of the Father. In this same Word, "the Father speaks the Word and speaks in the Word and in no other way, and Jesus speaks in the soul" (*Teacher* 242). Such a Person by nature has everything that the Father has. He is a Son through the generation that leads to existence and nature. Humankind is made in the image of the whole Trinity. As Eckhart scholar Donald Duclow explains, "I shall speak of the Son as an exemplary image in two aspects, first, because of his centrality to Eckhart's theological scheme; and second, because of his privileged place in the Dominican's analysis of image" (Duclow 31).

#### First Stage of Emanation

We now come to the matter of Eckhart's theology of God's formal emanation and self-diffusion. Commenting on his favorite sentence "I am who I am" in Exodus, Eckhart stresses the repetition of "am," pointing to a reflexive turning back of God's existence upon itself and its dwelling, while remaining fixed in itself. The repetition indicates God's "boiling" in giving birth to Himself—glowing in Himself, as well as melting and boiling in and throughout Himself. Just as light that totally forces its whole being in light and into light, it is

everywhere turned back and reflected upon itself (*Teacher 46*). Thus, the first stage of emanation is a reflexive mirroring of Himself back from the Creation. It is in this context that the appearance or image of the second stage becomes possible.

### Second Stage of Emanation

Eckhart uses metaphors of “swelling up” to explain why the emanation of the Persons in the Godhead is the prior ground of creation. There is a second stage in the production of Existence, and Eckhart uses another metaphor to describe its “boiling over” (*bullitio*). He writes:

The image has the character of a birth, an offspring, and a son inasmuch as it comes forth in the same nature and is equal and similar in everything to what produced it. Hence the Son, the Image, is in the Father and the Father is in him; he is one in the father.

(John 10:38) (*Teacher 237*)

Continuing, Eckhart next explains how the Son was generated as “the only begotten Son”:

The Son does not exist nor is he produced by will, but by nature or naturally. The Son, as the perfect likeness, breathes forth love, the Holy Spirit, who is also truly uncreated inasmuch as he remains in the image and the image in him. (*Teacher 237*)

Eckhart's God creates constantly, and He creates in the present moment without ceasing. What is produced from him is his Word and Commandment. For this

reason, the Son in the Godhead (the Word "in the Principle") is always being born, and always has been born. Eckhart tells us, "Under the name 'Beginning' or 'Principle' understand the Father, under 'Word' the son, and because a word cannot exist without a breath, consequently also understand the Holy Spirit" (*Teacher* 237).

For Eckhart, the Trinitarian Persons are an emanation of Persons in the Godhead. In the same act of creation, God begets the creatures from the "darkness" on the face of the deep, the Word that becomes flesh, and the Holy Spirit that mediates between them.

#### Eckhart's Teaching on Godhead (Gotheit)

Godhead as the ground of God, which is parallel to the ground of soul, which is called by Eckhart "the inner city" or "the silent desert." Godhead is the place where God reposes, where there is no distinction between Father, Son and the Spirit. "For Eckhart the three persons of the Trinity are not the absolute, for they display differentiation and activity. Behind the Trinity and beneath the history of salvation lies the absolute Godhead, out of time and space, ineffable because infinitely diverse from the being of creatures," says Eckhart Scholar Thomas O'Meara (178). The difference between God and Godhead are mainly that God works and Godhead reposes. Godhead is alone with Itself.

Godhead as God beyond God. The nature of Godhead is nameless. It is free of all names, it is bare of all forms, wholly empty and free, as God in himself



is empty and free. It is so utterly one and simple, as God is one and simple in nature, that man cannot in any way look into it. But as He is simply one, without any manner or properties, He is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit. And yet, Eckhart says:

God is the name most proper to God of all names, as "man" is the name of men. (I say that) whoever perceives something in God and attaches thereby some name to him, that is not God. God is above names and above nature. (*Essential* 20)

He continues, "We should learn not to give any name to God lest we imagine that in so doing we have praised and exalted him as we should; for God is 'above names' and ineffable" (*Essential* 205). Godhead is ineffable because no one can say anything or understand anything about him. Godhead is beyond all understanding, and no one understands that which is beyond words. Even so, Eckhart tries, "If I say, 'God is a being,' it is not true; he is a being transcending being and a transcending nothingness" (*Essential* 207).

In order to perceive God, we need to be stripped of all images and means of comparison. Hence, according to Eckhart, God must just become me, and I must just become God (*Essential* 208). Brilliantly, in his very well-known eighty-third German Sermon, Eckhart says:

You should love him as he is a non-God, a non-Spirit, a non-person, and non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright "one," separated from all duality; and in that one we should eternally sink down, out

of "something" into "nothing." (*Essential* 208)

Eckhart asks his audience to sink down deeper into the simple ground, the silent desert where distinction never gazed, where there is no distinction between Father, Son and the Spirit. "From the standpoint of such negation, neither Trinity nor Unity are fully adequate terms to give knowledge of a God who is 'one without unity and three without trinity'" (McGinn 1981:11).

Beyond the standpoint of Godhead as Nothingness, as God beyond God, it seems that Eckhart proposes a kind of non-theistic mysticism in which D. T. Suzuki was able to find some similarities between Zen and Eckhart's thought. And we find even more similarities between Meister Eckhart and Master Zhuang, who views Dao as void, when we look at Eckhart's emphasis on Godhead, that is the One, the unity of Godhead.

Godhead is the One (unum), unity. Godhead is the ground of God.

Eckhart calls it the One. Eckhart's extreme emphasis on the divine unity is Neoplatonic in origin. Although some other Christian thinkers have brought the doctrine of divine unity into reconciliation with the Christian dogma of the Trinity, Eckhart has a different view. Perhaps one of the most astonishing features of Eckhart's thought is that the Trinity of Persons is subordinate to the unity of Godhead. The Godhead, for Eckhart, lies deeper than the divine Trinity. Eckhart says: "Anyone who beholds the number two or who beholds distinction does not behold God, for God is one, outside and beyond number, and is not counted with

anything" (*Teacher* 63).

The creatures are of great multitude and inequality, but unity and equality are proper to God and divine things. Multitude is reduced to and returns to unity, inequality to equality, and opposition to harmony. However, the three Persons in the Godhead, although they are plural, are yet not many, but one. In the same way, the Scripture, "The Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one" (1 John 5:7). Nevertheless, Eckhart advocates the unity of the Godhead from other ways of argument. First of all, "Nature always begins from the One and returns to the One. In the Godhead, it is the same in the case of the notional acts; the one essence is their root, and these three are the one essence" (*Teacher* 146). Second, the term "one" means the same as "indistinct," because all distinct things are two or more, but all indistinct things are one. Third, Godhead is the purest existence itself. Therefore, we say he is the One. Eckhart thus concludes:

It should be recognized now that the term "one" is a negative word but is in reality affirmative. Moreover, it is the negation of negation which is the purest form of affirmation and the fullness of the term affirmed . . . . It is impossible for there to be two infinite things because infinite is that outside of which there is nothing. But Godhead, as we know, he is contained and limited by no genus or comprehended by no limits, is infinite. Therefore, he is one and unique. (*Teacher* 167)

Regarding the unity of the Godhead, the following is a relevant passage written by Eckhart:

Everything that is alien to the One and far from it God hates; God invites and draws to the One. All creatures seek the One, the very meanest of created things seek the One, and the highest creatures find the One; drawn above their natures and transformed, they seek the One in the One, the One in its self. (*Essential* 230)

Seeking the One in the One probably is the ultimate goal for Meister Eckhart, but he emphasizes the spirit of "seeking" and "finding" in many other passages. In Chapter Five, we will look more closely at this aspect of this pursuit of God, and hopefully gain more understanding about Eckhart's vision about the ultimate goal of life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Tian and God; Dao and Godhead

#### Comparison and Contrast of Tian and God

Parenthood, Tian and God as the Father. Both *Zhuang Zi* and Eckhart agree that Tian and God are like parents to children. Moreover, Eckhart considers that God is our truest Father because our physical father will perish and the Heavenly Father will not. In his words:

My fleshly father is not actually my father except in one little portion of his nature, and I am separated from him; he may be dead and I alive. Therefore the Heavenly Father is truly my Father, for I am his Son and have everything that I have from him, and I am the same Son and not a different one. (*Essential* 188)

In a similar way, Master Zhuang praises Tian (Heaven) and Di (Earth) as our parents, because they offer us space and food for living. He conveys the idea that we should serve Tian more obediently than we serve our physical parents. In one story, when Sir Come falls ill and all his family is sad about his impending death, his friend, Sir Plow goes to call on him, and says: "Great is the transforming Creator! What nest will he make of you? Where will he send you? Where will he turn you into a rat's liver? Where will he turn you into a bug's leg?" Sir Come answered peacefully that he received the form as a human being from Yin and Yang. He adds, "The relationship of yin and yang to a man is no less important than that of parents to a child. If they urge me to die and I resist, that is my

ill-temper." As for what the Creator will transform him into, Sir Come seemed willing to accept whatever form the Creator wills. He says:

Now, the Great Smelter casts his metal. If the metal were to jump up and say, "You must make me into Excalibur!" the Great Smelter would certainly think that it was inauspicious metal. Now if I, who have chanced to take on human form, were to say, "Man! I must remain a man," the Great Transforming Creator would certainly think that I am an inauspicious man. Now, once I accept Heaven and Earth as the Great Forge, and the Transforming Creator as the Great Smelter, I'm willing to go wherever they send me. (17/6/55-57; Mair 59)

Meister Eckhart has a different idea of creation, but very often he asks his audience to will what God wills, and to empty themselves so that they have nothing, will nothing and know nothing. God will pour all He has into the humble person. The similarities in the concepts of paternity between the two masters is evident, with one notable difference, Master Zhuang emphasizes both Tian and Di as our Parents, while Eckhart seldom mentions the grace of the Earth.

(Tian) and God as the creative dynamic.

What would Meister Eckhart say if asked, "What does God do in the Heaven?" He would answer that God generates his Son in Heaven, and is even now generating his Son in Heaven. He would also have an answer to the question: "Why didn't God create the world earlier?" He would reply:

He could not because he did not exist. He did not exist before the world did. Furthermore, how would he have created earlier when he had already created the world in the very now in which he was God?  
(*Essential* 85)

Eckhart's God is a god who gives birth, as pure generation, to the life of all things. For Eckhart, the divine emanation (*emanatio*) indicates the origin or "flowing out" of all things from the divine source, and can be used to describe both the processions of the Persons in the Trinity (*bullitio*) and of the production of all created things (*evullitio*). God is the creative dynamic source, and it is necessary for something first to "boil" itself totally and then finally to "boil over," so that it can be completely perfected in itself while overflowing with a fruitfulness which is more than perfection. In the same way, the Great Smelter melts the creatures out of the Great Forge of Heaven and gives them being. For *Zhuang Zi*, however, the creative dynamic is vitalized by Qi (energizing ether) which is composed of Yang in the active phase and Yin in the passive. Zhuang's theory is thus of a different, more elemental nature, compared to Eckhart's theology of divine emanation.

Dao and God both immanent and transcendent. God, for Eckhart, is simultaneously immanent and transcendent. As Bernard McGinn puts it:

I have suggested that for Meister Eckhart, dialectical thinking functioned as a way to bring to speech in speculative fashion Christian belief in a God that was both utterly transcendent and yet

perfectly immanent, more present to the creature than the creature was to itself. (McGinn 1981:137)

Eckhart's God moves everything, but He Himself remains unmoved. For Eckhart, "God lives in the soul with everything that he and all creatures are. Therefore, where the soul is, there God is, for the soul is in God" (Fox 1991:388). Matthew Fox calls this theology "Panentheism," which signifies that, "We are in God and God in us, which is to say that God is 'over all, through all, and within all'—but that does not mean that we are God. Then what is there that exists outside of God? Absolutely nothing" (Fox 1991:193). Here the contrast with the universal Dao of Zhuang is most evident.

It does seem, however, that both *Zhuang Zi* and Eckhart emphasize the "equality" of things inside of Dao or God. For example, *Zhuang Zi* speaks of the Dao as dwelling in everything, and of everything as the center of Dao. Tian-Di are one in Dao, just as Father/Son/Spirit are one in Godhead, thus creativity emanates from "one." Dao lives in ants, in grass, and in things such as tiles and shards. It is interesting that in Eckhart's fifty-second German Sermon, he speaks in a similar tone:

So, therefore, let us pray to God that we may be free of "God" and that we may apprehend and rejoice in that everlasting truth in which the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal—there where I



was established, where I wanted what I was and was what I wanted.

*(Essential 200)*

And in the twenty-sixth sermon, Eckhart says:

The greatest blessing in Heaven and on Earth is based on "equality."

What divine nature accomplishes at the height of the soul, that is, as

the "spark of the soul," is "equality." No human beings can follow

God completely without having an "equality with God" within

themselves. (Fox 1991:366-367)

Master Zhuang expands this "equality" to things without life; and Eckhart even extends this "equality" to the highest angel, human souls, and the lowly flies, which distinguishes him from typical anthropocentric Western thinkers. One very well-known sentence astonishes nearly everyone, "God's ground and the soul's ground is one ground."

Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart meet each other on this common ground of being. One speaks in classical Chinese, the other speaks in High German, yet their commonality is deep; they share a conception of the immanence of Tian and God in the created world.

The problem of persona, Tian, the Great Creator, and the Great Clod.

*Zhuang Zi* does not speak of Tian or Dao as an anthropomorphic ruler. Unlike Eckhart, *Zhuang Zi* never conveys Tian and Dao by using such subjective phrases as, "He likes," "He hates" or "He loves." However, in the Inner Chapters, the

personified term, "the Great Creator" (*zao wu zhe* or *zao hua zhe*) appears at least five times. Another term he uses is "the Great Clod" (*da kuai*), the substance that gives life. As far as we can understand, Master Zhuang simply uses the personified form to convey the whole idea of a transformation of lives. He does not imply a real existing person as embodying the Great Transforming Creator. From the big picture of his ontological theory, the creatures in the world are moved or transformed by the dynamic of Qi. Basically, his theory can be summed up by one phrase, "*yi qi er hua*" or "the transformation of Qi." Pei-Jung Fu, in discussing Zhuang's use of "Creator," says "he is hardly serious in taking Creator as a personal deity" (1984:279).

Although the ancient Chinese had a concept of a personified Creator,<sup>4</sup> it was different from the Christian God. *Zhuang Zi's* scholar Kuang-ming Wu has this comment:

As for "the True Lord" in nature in Chuang Tzu's [*Zhuang Zi's*] satirical panegyric ontology (in his Second Chapter), Huang Chinghung claimed that Chuang Tzu takes him to exist, whereas Kuo Hsiang claimed that Chuang Tzu takes him not to exist; both are mistaken. [*Zhuang*] explicitly says in many ways that he does not know and cannot know. (Wu 1982:85)

From the following passage, it is apparent that Master Zhuang did believe there

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<sup>4</sup> If interested in this topic, please read Peijung Fu, "The Concept of Tien in Ancient China" (Fu, 1984).

exists a sort of spiritual substance throughout our physical body:

I happened to see some little pigs suckling at their dead mother.

After a short while, they all abandoned her and ran away hastily. It was because they no longer saw themselves in her and because they no longer sensed her to be their kind. What they loved about their mother was not her physical form but that which animated her form.

(14/5/38-40; Mair 47)

"That which animated her form" is what *Zhuang Zi* calls as "the True Lord" (*Zhen Zai* or *Zhen Jun*). It is my understanding that *Zhuang Zi* does advocate the existence of a spiritual substance which may not be the same as the soul mentioned often by Eckhart. The True Lord definitely plays an important role in Master Zhuang's vision of a "joyful wandering" life. As for a personified Ruler or Creator, it is significant that Master Zhuang does not advocate any similar concept, nor does he deny such a possibility.

#### Comparison and Contrast of Dao and Godhead

Charles Wei-Shun Fu, in his article "Lao, Zhuang, Kuo Hsiang and Zen Buddhism," uses six categories to interpret the Dao theory of Lao Zi. These six dimensions of Dao inform my structure for a comparison and contrast of Dao and Godhead. To these six, I have added one more category, "Dao as *wu* (void) and Godhead as nothingness," which is very important in the content of Zhuang's and Eckhart's thoughts. Moreover, seven is a significant number for both traditions, so we have the following seven points of contrast to guide our discussion.

Dao as reality and Godhead as reality. Since "existence" is one synonym for reality, Eckhart's Godhead is Existence, and every act of existence comes from Godhead. In this universe, Godhead is both inside and beyond this space-time continuum. He is always being-creating and enjoying creation: "Therefore, whatever God did or created a thousand years ago or a thousand years hence he is doing now; it is simply all one work" (*Teacher* 298). Analogously, we have the following passage from *Zhuang Zi*:

The Way (Dao) has attributes and evidence, but it has no action and no form. It may be transmitted, but cannot be received. It may be apprehended, but cannot be seen. From the root, from the stock, *before there was Heaven or Earth, for all eternity truly has it existed.* It inspires demons and gods, gives birth to Heaven and Earth . . . . *It is prior to Heaven and Earth but it is not ancient; it is senior to high antiquity, but it is not old.* (16/6/29-31; Mair 55) (emphasis added)

From this comparison, we see that Godhead, which reposes in being, is most similar to Dao, which also is without action in the world, yet is an ever-present reality.

Dao as origin and Godhead as origin. "Origin" means the source of things, or based on the western ontological way of thinking, the first cause or the prime mover. *Zhuang Zi* disavows the idea of a first cause, stating "There is a time before the time before beginning" (5/2/50; Mair 18). Nevertheless, we are told that

Dao too is "prior to Heaven and Earth." Dao has a primordial existence prior to this universe logically, if not temporally. One of the characteristics of the nature of Dao is that it is the source of things and the sustaining support of everything. Zhuang uses the following examples from mythology to point out the sustaining power of Dao:

The clansman Xiwei attained it,  
and thereby demarcated Heaven and Earth;  
The clansman Fuxi attained it,  
and thereby adjusted the breath of the mother.

. . . . The sun and moon attained it,  
and have never rested throughout the ages;  
Kanpi attained it,  
and thereby inherited Mount Kunlun . . . . (16/6/31-32; Mair 55-56)

There are a total of twelve mythological figures mentioned in the passage from which this excerpt comes. After attaining the Dao, they are all very powerful and do miraculous things. Dao is not only the source of power for these people, but also the source of sustaining power for the sun and the moon.

Eckhart calls Godhead "origin" (*ursprung*), in the very literal sense as of "primitive (primordial) springing." He thinks of the origin as prior to the manifestation of the threefold trinity. For Eckhart, Godhead is not just the

beginning of all our works and of our being; He is also the end and a resting place of all beings. In one passage, when Eckhart was talking about the wealth of God, he explains that God's wealth is based on five things. Among the five things, there are two aspects related to this subject "Godhead as origin." He writes, "God is the first cause, and hence constantly pours himself forth into all things." And "God is the source, and hence spreads himself over all things" (*Teacher 333*).

Dao, as origin, excludes a sense of a primordial first mover which is found in Eckhart's Godhead. However, both Eckhart and Zhuang Zi present these ultimates as the origin of beings and of this universe. Dao as the origin and sustaining power is mystically self-existent without any further explanation. Godhead as origin, as Reiner Schurmann well put it, also has a mystical feature that is beyond the Trinity. He says: "To speak of the Godhead is to think of a pre-originary origin, prior to all apposition; it is to think of god's "pure nature," his "concealed intimacy," his "abysmal," "limpid," "hidden, anarchic essence" (Schurmann 1978:311). Godhead is the repose of God. Godhead does not act, God acts. The way he speaks of God is basically scripturally sound, except when he turns to speak of a God beyond God, and the nothingness of Godhead. His particular way of thinking shocks the scholastic mind whose construction is based on the *raison d'être* of things. At least, *Zhuang Zi* would agree that Dao as origin is a "pre-originary" origin; and Eckhart would probably approve of that Godhead as origin, as in the expression "there is a time before the time before beginning."

Dao as way and Godhead as principle. The meaning of "principle" given in the *Oxford Student Dictionary* is "basic truth" or "general law of cause and effect." It is noteworthy that Dao in Chinese means both a cosmological way and a spiritual path for people to follow. According to the pictographs of Dao, it contains two parts; one is "head," the other is "walk," which generally is explained as a person walking on the way. For *Zhuang Zi*, Dao is not only a way of nature, it is also the way for us to follow in our life. It is *Zhuang Zi*'s analogy that Dao for human beings is like water for fish, natural and essential, so that we cannot live without the support or guidance of Dao. We actually live within Dao, and when we follow Dao as our way of life, we feel so natural that we would not know we are living within it. *Zhuang Zi* writes:

Fish delight in water, and man delights in the Way. Delighting in water, fish find adequate nourishment just by passing through their ponds. Delighting in the Way, man's life is stabilized without ado.

Therefore, it is said, "Fish forget themselves in the rivers and lakes; men forget themselves in the arts of the Way." (18/6/72-73; Mair 61)

When we hold onto Dao, we are near to accomplishing our goals. When society is lacking the guidance of Dao, it is disordered and dangerous. So the sages seek nothing but to preserve their life in the midst of the inevitable transformations of the world.

Correspondingly, Eckhart asserts that Godhead is the root and principle of all creatures. "Form and matter, active and passive, Heaven and Earth, are

produced at the same time in the principle. That is, in the act of existence" (*Essential* 90-91). God is the principle that gives meaning to existence, insofar as he is the end for which man exists and lives. Eckhart continues:

He gives birth either always or never, because the end and the beginning are the same there, as we said before. An Agent like that, one that is a principle in which there is Logos and Idea, is an essential agent that precontains its effect in a higher way and exercises causality over the whole species of its effect. (*Essential* 132)

From the above passage, we understand that Godhead is the principle or cause of the effect, just as the figure in the mind is the principle of the figure on the wall.

For Eckhart, God ought to be the principle of our every intention and action because we are made to have the nature of imitating God. He declares, "The Father in the Godhead is the source and principle of each and all emanation" (*Teacher* 190). By contrast, *Zhuang Zi* conceives of Dao as more "in the world," while not of it. The notion of world-transcending ideas, laws, and principles is distinctly European, and Eckhart naturally frames his analysis in the language of these traditional scholastic forms, while *Zhuang Zi* has no such limitations.

Dao as the source of virtue vs. God as the source of virtue. *Zhuang Zi* advocated a return to innate spontaneity and innocence which, compiled with the drive of Dao, is true virtue. He is critical of the kind of virtues known as humaneness and righteousness (*ren* and *yi*), which were advocated by other great



teachers, such as Confucius and Mencius. *Zhuang Zi* created the following dialogues to show his concern about how this kind of human-made virtue would spoil our innocent nature:

Master Yi Er went to see Hsu Yu. Xu You asked him,

"How has Yao aided you?"

"Yao told me," said Master Yi Er, "You must dedicate yourself to humaneness and righteousness, and speak clearly about right and wrong."

"Then why have you come here?" asked Xu You.

"Yao has already tattooed you with humaneness and righteousness and lopped off your nose with right and wrong. How will you be able to wander on the path of untroubled and untrammelled evolution?" (19/6/82-84; Mair 62-63)

For *Zhuang Zi*, people who have engraved *ren* and *yi* in their minds would not be able to "wander on the path of untroubled and untrammelled evolution," which is the path of Dao. To regain our innate spontaneity and innocence, we need to endure a process of "remolding and reworking." His hope, or goal, is that Dao may "erase my tattoo and restore my nose, enabling me to avail myself of wholeness" (19/6/87; Mair 63).

*Zhuang Zi* calls a person of virtue a "*zhenren*." The true man of virtue is someone whose knowledge can ascend the heights of the Dao. "Only when there

is a true man is there true knowledge" (15/6/4; Mair 52). Thus, for the true man of old:

[H]is likes were reduced to one and his dislikes were also reduced to one. His "one" was one and "not one" was also one. Being "one" he was a follower of man. He in whom neither Heaven nor man is victorious over the other is called a true man. (16/6/19-20; Mair 53)

For *Zhuang Zi*, the source of virtue is Tian (Heaven). If a person's life has been coordinated with Tian, then this person has virtue. The following passage indicates this point very clearly:

Of those who *received their destiny from Heaven*, only Yao and Shun were correct—at the head of the ten thousand things. Fortunately, they could correct their own lives and thereby correct a host of lives. (13/5/10-11; Mair 43) (emphasis added)

As we know from our previous study, Tian merges with Dao, so the source of virtue can also be said to be Dao.

Meister Eckhart has similar ideas regarding the source of virtue, though he expresses them in a different way. For Eckhart, all the virtues are connected with the love of the good. This is why the virtues are also connected with charity and the ideals of returning virtue to the world. He says: "Charity is the love of the good insofar as it is good, and this is God, the 'good good,' 'the good of every good'" (*Teacher* 156). A person with true virtue is free and he loves to do good

not for this or that reason, he simply acts from the love of good. God's charity loves in all things. Eckhart says:

One and simple in every way is the one God whose charity loves in all things—nothing else outside him or beyond him! Therefore, it is necessary that it have as much love for the one as for the other, for the other as for itself, for the one as for all, for anyone as for God.  
(*Teacher 157*)

If we want to have all the Father's good things come to us, then we need to be a son, to be an offspring of God. Thus, according to Eckhart, "all virtues' goods, properties, and perfections, such as *being able to act easily, promptly, and delightfully*," will arrive (*Teacher 158*) (emphasis added). In this category, both Eckhart and Zhuang Zi stress the similar idea that virtues come from the Ultimate, and that people who are practicing virtue do not perform good deeds for any motive or reason, but simply from their nature of loving the good.

Dao as technique vs. Godhead as the source of function. It seems to me that Master Zhuang emphasizes "Dao as technique," and Meister Eckhart "God as function," so I have combined these two categories into one.

In the story about a cook who cuts up an ox for Lord Wenhui, *Zhuang Zi* shows how skill and Dao merge into one. What the cook loves and practices is from Dao, which goes beyond mere skill. In the words of the cook, *Zhuang Zi* opens a window onto practicing the Dao as a technique. As the cook says:

Today, I meet the ox with my spirit rather than looking at it with my

eyes. My sense organs stop functioning and my spirit moves as it pleases. In accord with the natural grain, I slice at the great crevices, lead the blade through the great cavities. Following its inherent structure, I never encounter the slightest obstacle even when the veins and arteries come together or where the ligaments and tendons join, much less from obvious big bones. (7/3/6-7; Mair 26)

From the above passage, we learned two crucial elements that help us to master Dao as technique. First, in whatever activity, it is the person's spirit which not only needs to be united with Dao, but also needs to join with the structure of things. Here, "to meet with the object" means to concentrate our consciousness on a spiritual flow or interaction with the object. To do this, we need to acknowledge the structures of things or the nature of the things we are dealing with.

It is not an easy task to master the Dao as technique. We have seen that it contains both the exterior acting and inner preparation of spirit. There are many people of technique mentioned in the Outer Chapters and Miscellaneous Chapters of *Zhuang Zi*, such as wheelwright Flat who masters his technique well but cannot put it in words. Another is a hunchback cicada catcher who "holds his arms as though they were the branches of a withered tree." The inner spirit that is involved in this technique is expressed explicitly in the following passage:

The greatness of Heaven and Earth and the numerousness of the myriad things notwithstanding, I am aware only of the cicada's wings. I neither turn around nor to the side and wouldn't exchange

the wings of a cicada for all the myriad things. How can I not succeed? (48/19/20-21; Mair 176-177)

Meister Eckhart, in commenting on the Gospel story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38), advocates the ideal life of action that flows out of contemplation. It is written that Jesus Christ entered a little town where a woman named Martha received him. She had a sister named Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to his words; but Martha hurried about, serving Jesus. According to Eckhart, "Martha could work and in the midst of activity preserve her inner silence and unity with God," but "Mary's union with God, on the other hand, was so fragile and untested that she had to rest at Jesus' feet in order to preserve it" (Caputo 204). For Eckhart, the best life is the mixed life, which is "neither pure vision nor sheer activism," and yet is "an active life which springs from deeper sources," namely, the union of God and soul (Caputo 205). Therefore, Eckhart explains, "He who works in light ascends to God free and stripped of all means. His light is his activity and his activity is his light" (*Teacher* 340). He continues:

. . . One becomes two, two is one; light and spirit, these two are one in the embrace of eternal light. (The You and I, once embraced by the eternal are one; and this two that is one is a flaming spirit standing above all things (yet under God) on the rein of eternity. (*Teacher* 340)

The eternal light is the wisdom which comes from God, and we would not act well

without the wisdom or knowledge of things. Although Martha chose not to stay with Jesus, she was busy in the kitchen preparing food for her guests. She stood alone on her soul-ground, which already was one with God. So, Eckhart praises Martha, and he says:

Martha was so grounded in being that her activity did not hinder her. Work and activity led her to eternal happiness. Granted, her happiness was somewhat impaired by mediation; but her noble nature, her constant striving, and the aforementioned virtue stood her well. (*Teacher 343*)

Eckhart's own life speaks for him in the same way. He was a teacher, a preacher, and a governor of worldly affairs. His busy life shows that God is necessary for all creatures, and that one must give up one's will to God. No matter what happens in life, one remains in unity with God's will wherever it would manifest its own function.

Dao as Wu (void) vs. Godhead as the nothingness. The self-existence of Dao is the foundation of *Zhuang Zi*'s ultimate concern, and "Dao as Wu" is one of the characteristics of Zhuang's explanation of Dao. It is much easier to interpret these concepts based on the following four categories:

1. The unknowability of Dao. It is impossible for us to totally comprehend the essence of Dao because it is beyond our mind. It is only likely that we reach it from the deepest realm of our spirituality; perhaps that was the case with *Zhuang Zi*. To his way of thinking, we humans are unable to comprehend or convey what

Dao exactly is, not only because it is formless, but also because it is beyond our ordinary mode of thinking. The existence of Dao is beyond our conventional mode of thing-thinking—there are words that stand for things, but Dao is not a thing. Dao is existing among things, but it is invisible. So we are unable to find a good description for Dao. That is the reason why *Zhuang Zi* cannot help using a negative term “Wu” to describe the unique existence of Dao.

2. The ineffableness of Dao. The ineffableness of Dao manifests itself in two ways. We are speechless about what Dao is, and Dao itself is beyond language. When we catch the essence of it, we naturally become forgetful about words. This probably explains why mystics mostly keep silent during and after their experience of rapture. The mystics sometimes look like drunkards, and sometimes they look like “dead ashes” in *Zhuang Zi*’s terms. About the ineffableness of Dao, there is a passage in the Outer Chapters:

The Way cannot be heard, for what is heard is not the Way; the Way cannot be seen, for what is seen is not the Way; the Way cannot be spoken, for what is spoken is not the Way. Do you know the formlessness of that which gives form to form? The Way does not correspond to any name. (60/22/61-63; Mair 219)

From reading the above quotation, we are able to understand why *Zhuang Zi* gives a description name for Dao. “Wu-Wu” is like Eckhart’s “negation of negation” that shuts up the door of our speech, but opens a window for our sense of Dao. Inside of “Wu-Wu,” there is a major affirmation hidden.

3. The Nothingness of Dao. In Chinese, "Wu" means nothing. Dao is not a thing, so *Zhuang Zi* calls it "Wu." Even "Dao" itself is nothing but a name. "Dao" is transcendent because it is prior to the universe. Nevertheless, the "nothingness" of Dao is not actually nothing, but simply a contrast with the different features of the existence of the myriad things. Dao is everlasting, but all things are perishable. Is it proper to call Dao "Wu" (nothing)? Master *Zhuang* has a passage explicating this paradox:

The Way cannot be held to exist, nor can it be held to be nonexistent. "The Way" as a name operates as a supposition which is premised. Contingent causation and nonfacticity are but on corner things. What have they to do with the great method? . . . . The Way is the delimitation of things. Neither words nor silence are satisfactory for conveying it. Without words and without silence, our deliberations reach their utmost limits. (73/25/79-80, 81-82; Mair 267)

Now, we understand that all the names are nothing but suppositive terms we gave to "Dao" because of our need for speech. Even so, the way that *Zhuang Zi* describes the Dao as "Wu" shows he is not only a brilliant philosopher but also a humorist who knows perfectly about the limits of philosophical discourse.

In this category "Godhead as the nothingness," Eckhart shares more with *Zhuang Zi* than in the other categories. He uses many similar terms that are



conceptually analogous to those of *Zhuang Zi*. Based on his teachings, we find that "Godhead as the nothingness" at least contains the following paradox, "Godhead as the nothingness" is because something comes from Nothing. This Nothing is God, who is the Nothing beyond being. Eckhart says, "All things are created from Nothing; therefore their true origin is Nothing, and so far as this noble will inclines toward created things, it flows off with created things toward their Nothing" (*Essential* 184). Eckhart continues, "If I say, 'God is a being' it is not true; he is a being transcending being and a transcending Nothingness" (*Essential* 207).

Following a similar reasoning to *Zhuang Zi*, Eckhart refers to Godhead as a "transcending Nothingness." There can be no better description of Godhead than that. However, Eckhart distinguishes four meanings of the Nothing which Paul, as the stricken Saul, saw when he rose from the ground (Acts 9:8). First, this nothing is God, who is the nothing beyond being; second, he saw nothing but God; third, in all things he saw nothing but God; and fourth, when Saul saw God, he saw all things as nothing (*Essential* 320-322). In sum, the meaning of "Godhead as the nothingness" is closer to the first meaning that God is the nothing beyond being. Now we can turn to the second reason why Godhead is referred to as the nothingness by Eckhart.

"Godhead as the nothingness" implies that we must receive God as a form beyond measure, a being beyond being; for he has no limited mode of existence. God has the being of all creatures in himself. If we are to know God, it must

happen without an intervening medium. In seeing nothing, we see the divine nothing. What Eckhart points out is very close to what *Zhuang Zi* says in the former passage, "The Way cannot be seen, for what is seen is not the Way . . . ." The similarities between *Zhuang Zi* and Eckhart are hard to extend beyond this point, first because of the linguistic gap and, second, because the subject they are talking about is not measurable. But we are intuitively able to see how close they are in their depictions of the fundamental paradoxes of reality.

God is nothing because "God is free and unencumbered in all his works and seeks nothing of his own" (*Teacher* 241). Since God is free from all obstacles, such as possessiveness and ignorance, He is free and empty without interruption and outside of the space-time framework. To speak of Godhead is to think of a pre-originary origin, prior to all opposition. It is to think of God's pure nature, which we found to be a pure nothingness—entirely deprived of a "why." Indeed, Eckhart's meditation on "Godhead as the nothingness" points beyond God as an origin. Reiner Schurmann, when he compares Eckhart's philosophy with Soto Zen, titles this as "The Loss of The Origin." He says: "God, man, and the world are considered in their anarchic emanation where they 'bubble forth' from the pure nature, the Godhead, without a why" (Schurmann 1978:307-308). Eckhart attempts, however, to conceive of the origin prior to the manifestation of the threefold Persons. And he describes the pure nature of God, which is Godhead, as follows: "God seeks nothing of his own; In all his works he is empty and free

and works them out of genuine love" (*Teacher* 240).

All the above three reasons provide answers to the question, "Why does Eckhart think of Godhead as the nothingness?" The final question, however, is whether the two masters speak of the same Ultimate Reality when they refer to nothingness. When we compare Eckhart's with Zhuang's thought, we find some of Eckhart's concepts more similar, and some less similar, to *Zhuang's*. If we examine the closeness of their ideas rather than their language and tone, however, it seems clear that they are indeed speaking about the same Ultimate Reality.

The God of Western Christianity is obviously somewhat different from Tian as it was conceived by *Zhuang*. However, the nature of Godhead—its ineffableness, its pre-originary origin, and its paradoxical nothingness—show major similarities with *Zhuang's* Dao. *Zhuang* and Eckhart are both eminently rich sources for scholars to explore more deeply. It is my hope that there will be others seeking to share their wisdom on this subject, and that more people will experience this crossing of the threshold between Eastern and Western spirituality. In the next chapter we will examine what the two masters say about the relationship between human beings and the Ultimate. We will also inquire into the goal and ideal of life as presented in the thought of *Zhuang* and Eckhart.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Ultimate in Relation to Human Beings

*No instruction can lead to encounter with You, and none can lead out of it. For it to happen, we need only a total acceptance of Presence and presence. Similarly, we need the same acceptance of Presence after supreme encounter is over. We reach it saying simply You; and we leave it saying You. -- Martin Buber (Vermes 1980:253)*

The previous four chapters provide us some background knowledge concerning the two masters' ontological concerns. They also prepare us to ask these questions: For each master, what is the relationship between Ultimate Reality and actual life? How does each view life? What is the spiritual goal for each? In this chapter we are going to study these questions and try to find answers by focusing on the relationship between the Ultimate and humans.

These questions assume that each master had a spiritual goal and tried to provide experiences for followers to imitate. Another premise is that Zhuang and Eckhart each practiced his own belief. The teachings they left are not pure logic, but concrete guidance based on personal experience, and these teachings provide a direction for our spiritual development.

#### Meister Eckhart—The Perfection of Life

According to Eckhart, the human, inasmuch as s/he is a rational animal and made in God's image, is something higher than the sense faculties and is an

intellectual being. Eckhart does not directly discuss the meaning of life; his message on this is hidden in his teaching of the relationship between God and man. Eckhart's teaching contains his goal of life: the perfection of life. By studying his teaching on the relationship between God and humanity, we are able to understand his goal of life. Meister Eckhart uses the following three analogies to pinpoint this relationship.

(1) Humans are not servants but friends of God. In one verse of John in the Bible, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have not called you servants, but friends" (John 15:14). Eckhart explains that a servant does not know the mind of his master. God is in human nature and will. We have everything from our nature, and we do not ask for anything from God. He says: "Because if I were accepting anything from God, I should be subject to him as a servant, and he in giving would be a master. We shall not be so in life everlasting" (*Essential* 188). One should not accept or esteem God as being outside oneself, but as one's own and as what is within one. Servants do not know what is in their master's mind, but "God and I, we are one. I accept God into me in knowing; I go into God in loving" (*Essential* 188). In the meantime, Eckhart points out that some simple people think that they will see God as if he were standing there, and they here. It is not so because God and me, we are one. God's being is our life. If our life is God's being, then God's existence must be our existence and God's "isness" is my "isness," neither less nor more.

Meister Eckhart continues to advocate the closeness between God and

humans, as follows: "When God made man, he made women from men's side. . . . So should the just soul be equal with God and close beside God, equal beside him, not beneath or above" (*Essential* 187). From the above paragraph, we can understand that Eckhart promotes humans to a high position which is non-dualistically related to God. And he seems to emphasize original blessedness more than original sin. It is his high esteem for human nature that enables us to compare his thought with classical Chinese thinkers, especially Master Zhuang. Although it is not Eckhart's intention to lean Eastward, within Christian theology, Eckhart's assertion of equality between God and the human soul makes him seem daring and, perhaps, heretical. Claims of human divinity or, at least, sagely perfection, are more common outside the Christian West.

Before we proceed to the second analogy, let us review Eckhart's teaching about the soul, which he calls the Spark (*Vunkelin*). We read, "God created the soul according to the highest perfection, and poured into it in its first purity all his brightness and yet he has remained unmixed" (*Essential* 194). For Eckhart, the soul is closer to God than to oneself. (This implies a soul/body dualism with which Master Zhuang would not agree. Zhuang talks about the integrity of person. We will discuss this difference between Eckhart and Zhuang later in this chapter.) The spark of soul is sharing with God a common ground "where God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground" (*Essential* 192). The soul is truly the hidden God in humans. The spark of soul strives to return to the Fire where Father emanates his calling.

**(2) Human beings are sons of God.** We are sons of God through the process of "birth." (For Master Zhuang Tian Di gives humans both form and spirit.) The Father gives birth to his Only-Begotten Son in our soul—also called the little town or the inner world by Eckhart. This little town is in the soul so unique and so simple that no power, no manner, not God himself, may look at it. And Meister Eckhart explains the meaning of "birth" as follows, "As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives his Son birth naturally, so truly does he give him birth in the most inward part of the spirit, and that is the inner world" (*Essential* 183). For Eckhart, as long as we are not like God, we will continue to undergo the birth by which Christ is formed in us. Like Martha (Luke 10:41) we are restless and troubled about many things. We become sons of God only after every unlikeness has been cast off. "We shall be like him, for we shall see him just as he is, having been made one in him and through him" (1 John 3:2; John 17:21; *Essential* 173). The process of "birth" is actually concerned with casting away every unlikeness (or sin), and this happens in the very deep part of the spirit, which Eckhart calls "the inner world." From the above passages, we can sense a process of purification going on when this "birth" happens in the inner world of human souls. And it is the reproduction of Christ inside of "the inner world." The spark of soul is undergoing this generation of Christ in her. He is a Son through the generation that leads to existence, species and nature, and therefore he is the natural Son; we are sons through the rebirth that leads to conformity with his nature. He is "the Father's image" (Col. 1:15); we are made to the image of the

Whole Trinity—"Let us make man to our image" (Gen. 1:26). "He is the one to whom witness is given; we are the witnesses" (Acts 2:32) (*Essential* 170).

For Eckhart, this rebirth of Son in us is essentially no different from the nature of the Only-Begotten Son. Christ is the natural son; we are sons through rebirth because God gives birth to his Only-Begotten Son in the soul. The following passage drawn from Meister Eckhart's German Sermon Twenty Second speaks for Eckhart of a perfect unification between God and the soul: "Out of the purity he everlastingly bore me, his only-born Son, into that same image of his eternal Fatherhood, that I may be Father and give birth to him of whom I am born" (*Essential* 194). Here the line between the receiver and the giver of that "birth" has been erased. There is no difference of subject or object and the whole process itself is the unity. For Eckhart, God will and does complete his part of the job in the process. It is expected that humans will do their part of spiritual preparation to "co-up" with God. And Eckhart says that God is taking charge of his part of the work whether one is willing or not. In the same German Sermon, Eckhart addresses his audience in a tone of certainty, "God bears his Only-Begotten Son in you, whether you like it or not. Whether you are sleeping or working, he does his part" (*Essential* 196). God already does his part. What should men do to cooperate with him? The answer Eckhart gives is this, to imitate Jesus' will. Eckhart stresses:

One ought to imitate our Lord, but still not in everything he did.

Our Lord, we are told, fasted for forty days. But no one ought to



undertake to imitate this. Many of his works Christ performed with the intention that we should imitate him spiritually, not physically. And so we ought to do our best to be able to imitate him with our reason, for he values our love more than our works. (*Essential* 268)

To sum up, the view that we are sons of God contains two levels of meaning, (a) that God gives "birth" to us and we become perfected when we spiritually imitate his Only-Begotten Son, and (b) that we are already sons of God and share a common ground in our souls with God at this moment.

(3) The Kiss of the Soul. The human soul is the bride of God's Only-Begotten Son. This relationship is based on the love and the blessedness from God. To help people understand the love of God, Eckhart tells a story. (Unlike Master Zhuang, he seldom tells stories.) In this story, there was a loving couple. The wife lost an eye and she was distressed by this very much. Her husband asked her why she was so distressed. She said, "What distresses me is that I am afraid you'll love me less because of it." Then he said, "I do love you." Not long after, he gouged out one of his own eyes and came to his wife and said, "To make you believe that I love you, I have made myself like you." Meister Eckhart asserts that this story is apposite to a human being's situation. He says: "This stands for man, who would scarcely believe that God loved him so much, until God gouged out one of his own eyes and took upon himself human nature. This is what 'being made flesh' (John 1:14) is" (*Essential* 193). Although it is still difficult for some people to understand God's love, the above story about the

loving couple is one of the few strong metaphors Eckhart has ever employed. We are told that God is so loving that he invites the human soul to be his bride.

By contrast, Master Zhuang perhaps would not approve of this kind of self-sacrifice. It is important for Zhuang that we preserve what we gained from Tian Di both physically and spiritually. In the story of Wonton and his kind friends (see Chapter One above), Zhuang shows his concerns about respecting and accepting each other's primordial nature. Zhuang's Wonton story and Meister Eckhart's husband and wife story both have implications for the idea of love. For Eckhart, God is so loving that he is willing to put on the garment of humanity and become the same with human beings. However, due to their love and gratitude, Wonton's friends bored seven holes in his head (to make him like everyone else) and caused Wonton's death. Master Zhuang respects both human nature and divine nature. From his perspective, they are certainly equal but do not need to be the same.

Commenting on one verse of Luke, "Our Lord Jesus Christ went up into a little town, and was received by a virgin who was a wife" (Luke 10:38), Eckhart asserts that "if a man were to be a virgin forever, no fruit would come from him. If he is to become fruitful, he must of necessity be a wife" (*Essential* 178). Then what is the parabolic meaning of being a wife? What is the spiritual difference between "virgin" and "wife?" Indeed, for Eckhart, there is a big difference between them.

Eckhart tells us, there is one kind of spirituality of which "people are

possessively attached to prayer, to fasting, to vigils and to all kinds of exterior exercises and penances" (*Essential* 178). While a virgin who is a wife is full of freedom, without attachment, she is always equally close to God and to herself. Eckhart comments on the deficit of the attachment in the following passage:

Every attachment to every work deprives one of the freedom to wait upon God in the present and to follow him alone in the light with which he would guide you in what to do and what to leave alone, free and renewed in every present moment, as if this were all that you had ever had or wanted or could do. (*Essential* 178)

When the soul prepares well to be free and unpledged, without attachment, she is ready to be near to God in every present moment. The soul becomes a bride of the Only-Begotten Son who wants to exalt his beloved, so he comes out from "the secret treasure chamber of the eternal Fatherhood, in which he had eternally slept, unspoken, remaining within" (*Essential* 196). Therefore, the Son would "bring her back again into the exaltation from which she came," and He "wants to reveal to her the hidden secret of his hidden divinity, where he takes his rest with himself and with all created things" (*Essential* 196). Here, Meister Eckhart speaks in a very obscure way to illustrate this mystery. The soul was created according to God's perfection; that is why Eckhart says that the Son would bring her back to where she came from. And because of his revelation of all the secrets to her, they become one. It is said that from the unity of the Son and the soul, there comes the kiss—the deepest form of intimacy between God

and the soul.

The three analogies used to express the relationship between God and the soul all point to a climax completion of Eckhart's teaching, mystical union.

Regarding the meaning of this mystical union, Eckhart scholar John D. Caputo states:

The soul is no longer creature; God is no longer creator. We have to do not with "God" and the "soul"—for these are creator and creature—but with the ground of God (the Godhead) and the ground of the soul. And these are not "two" which must be "united," but rather nameless and numberless "ones" which are one with each other, so that it falsifies them to speak of their having to be "united" with "one another." They are a nameless, naked unity. (Caputo 1978:213)

The above passage of Caputo helps us understand that the mystical union contains not only the flow out of Godhead but also the return of the soul to the Godhead, a completion of the circle of being. Thus, for Eckhart, the mystical union is the ultimate goal of life. What is life? Eckhart answers, "God's being is my life. If my life is God's being, then God's existence must be my existence and God's isness is my is-ness, neither less nor more" (*Essential* 187). For Eckhart, such a goal is attainable because "in temporal existence man can reach the point where he is able to compel God" (*Essential* 195). One ought always to lift oneself up and grasp at what is good for oneself in the highest degree so that one will grow constantly

and mightily. To a degree of perfection, for Eckhart, the soul and the Godhead are equal and become not one, not two.

### Master Zhuang—The Fulfillment of Destiny

Master Zhuang's philosophy of life contains two parts, the critique of the existing value system and the alternative elevating of one's spiritual nature above it. In this section we will concentrate on the latter part. To begin with, it is essential to ask what caused Master Zhuang to develop his own ways of soteriology. Based on the content of the Inner Chapters, one can sense two aspects of the answer to this question. One aspect is Zhuang's vexations about life. The way life is so vulnerable and finite sorrows his heart. Owing to his sensitivity, he sees that all the things in the world are changing in every moment. After all, he sees through the vicissitudes of good and evil; life's changefulness is palpable for him. The other aspect that influences Zhuang's philosophy of life is his uncertainty about our consciousness of reality. Zhuang uses many dream metaphors to express his uncertainty. These two issues urge Zhuang to speculate on the existential meaning of life and, perhaps, lead him to seek for a right path to enable one to elevate one's spiritual nature.

To understand Zhuang's sorrow and uncertainty, let us review the following passage in the Chapter of "On the Equality of Things":

Once we have received our complete physical form, we remain conscious of it while we await extinction. In our strife and friction with other things, we gallop forward on our course unable to stop. Is

this not sad? We toil our whole life without seeing any results. We deplete ourselves with wearisome labor, but don't know what it all adds up to. Isn't this lamentable? There are those who say that at least we are not dead, but what's the good of it? Our physical form decays and with it the mind likewise. May we not say that this is the most lamentable of all? Is human life really so deluded as this? Am I the only one who is so deluded? Are there some individuals who are not deluded? (4/2/18-21; Mair 14)

Here, Master Zhuang is frank about his doubts and sadness about life.

Apparently, the encounter with Tian Dao changed his life attitude. There are passages with exclamations about the greatness of Dao (or heaven and earth) and a sense of contentment and tranquility that emerges from flowing with it. He encourages us to fulfill our destiny, and he confirms the ability of humans to ascend to the very highest spiritually. In Chapter Five, we read:

Of those who received their destiny from heaven, only Yao and Shun were correct—at the head of the ten thousand things.

Fortunately, they could correct their own lives and thereby correct a host of lives . . . . If a man who seeks fame can do this out of personal ambition, how much more so should one who takes heaven and earth as his palace and the myriad things as his treasury, his trunk and limbs as a mere lodging, his senses as phenomena; who treats as a whole all that knowledge knows; and whose mind never

dies! He would simply pick a day and ascend to the heights.

(13/5/10-13; Mair 43-44)

For those who attain the state of flowing with Dao, their life merges with it and they never "die." They are the same people as they were before, but their life attitude is changed. They take their physical body as a temporary lodge; their spirit of life ascends to the heights.

Although Master Zhuang's revelations of a spiritual path were not written for academic purposes, I need to articulate them systematically. We always need to keep in mind that it is not Zhuang's original intention to set up any system of theory or any formula of instructions for practice. Basically, Zhuang wants to interact with his readers and to inspire us to adapt our own ways of flowing with Dao.

In this section, I will approach Master Zhuang's spiritual goal in light of the relationship between the Dao and humans. To put them in a systematic way, Zhuang's spiritual goals will be approached under three topics, the integrity of personhood, spiritual freedom, and, finally, joining the unity of Tian Dao.

(1) The Integrity of Personhood. One of the ideal spiritual states Master Zhuang emphasized is the integrity of personhood, wherein one harmonizes himself with the myriad of things and one accompanies Tian Dao. Master Zhuang elaborates upon this spiritual state as follows, "One who attends to one's own mind and who is not easily diverted by sorrow and joy, realizing their inevitability and accepting them as if they were destiny, has attained the ultimate of integrity"

(10/4/42-43; Mair 34). The sages who attained the ultimate of integrity have realized their destiny and their roles among the myriad of things. They are content with their life and do not bear any desire of fame and fortune. For Zhuang, it is important to nurture one's life and preserve the wholeness of the physical body, yet he views the harmony inside as more important than the body. In one story, Zhuang tells about the great teacher Princely Nag who had been mutilated by having one of his feet cut off; this invalid teaches formless, speechless lessons, yet all of his students are satisfied. Commenting on such an unusual person, Zhuang remarks through the mouth of "Confucius," as follows:

Life and death are of great moment, but he is able to avoid their transformations. Though heaven may collapse and earth overturn, he would not be lost in their wake. Settled in nonreliance, he is unmoved by the changes in things. He recognizes that evolution is the destiny of things and thereby maintains what is essential.

(12/5/5-6; Mair 43)

In the above passage, "he is unmoved by the changes in things" implies the specific spiritual quality of equanimity. And, "he recognizes that evolution is the destiny of things" implies another spiritual quality which is called lucidity (*yiming*). To understand how Zhuang puts it, let us review the following passage:

If one sees things from the viewpoint of the differences, the liver and the gallbladder are as distant as Ch'u is from Viet. If one sees things from the viewpoint of their similarities, the myriad things are



all one. He who realizes this is unaware of the attractions of the senses but lets his mind wander instead in the harmony of integrity. He sees what bespeaks the identity of things instead of what bespeaks their loss. He sees the loss of his foot as the sloughing off a clump of earth. (12/5/7-8; Mair 43)

The word "to see" (*shi*) implies an internal knowledge or a clear vision of reality. He who attains the lucidity of vision does not depend on his senses. His clearness of reality is based on the empowerment of Dao, namely the intuitional insight of one's *xin* (heart-mind). The lucidity of vision and equanimity of *xin* are co-related to each other. One who is clear about the reality of life will not be troubled by the loss of anything because from the position of Dao, one does not lose anything. For sages, all things are coming from the Dao and will return to the Dao.

For Zhuang, thinking, feeling and intuitional insight are all properties of the *xin*. Unlike the modern Western notion of mind that has been dichotomized into categories like ego, subconsciousness and imagination, for Zhuang, *xin* covers both mental and spiritual activities. This is why the most appropriate translation in English for *xin* is "heart-mind."

Somehow a person's integrity is not evident in his physical form. Nag the Hump is ugly enough to terrify all under heaven, yet everybody likes him and trusts his words. Zhuang describes this kind of person as "*de bu xing*" (integrity not being existent in physical form). In the following passage, Zhuang conveys his idea that the integrity of a person has nothing to do with his appearance:

Levelness is the equilibrium of water at rest. We may use it as a standard, preserving it within so that without we are not ruffled.

Integrity is the cultivation of complete harmony. We can tell that a person has integrity, even though it may not be evident in her physical form, because she is indispensable to all things. (14/5/46-47; Mair 48)

Furthermore, after telling the similar story about Lipless Clubfoot Scattered, Zhuang states the conclusion, "When one's integrity is outstanding, the physical form will be forgotten" (14/5/51; Mair 48). With clarity and equanimity in one's *xin*, it is natural for one simply to act spontaneously from one's intuitive center without being bothered by any particular emotion, such as love for one's body or fear of its loss.

(2) Carefree Wandering, Spiritual Freedom. The epitomic theme of the Inner Chapters is to live by way of "carefree wandering" (*xiaoyao you*). This is also the title of the first chapter of the book, indicating the importance of spiritual freedom for Master Zhuang. *You* (play or wandering) is the essential theme which runs through the Inner Chapters. Michael Crandell states the meaning of "you" brilliantly:

Yu (You), referring to a quality of nondirectedness in locomotion; specifies the manner in which that spiritual path should be traversed. Once again, we return to an epigrammatic, conundrum-like formulation of Zhuang Zi's life-attitude, the best

direction in which to aim is nondirectedness. This does not connote withdrawal from the world; it connotes absence of attachment to any one particular perspective on it.<sup>5</sup> (Crandell 1983:114)

Indeed, Master Zhuang counsels a free-spiritedness that is not based on negative attitudes, one should avoid the pursuit of wisdom, knowledge, fame and gains, instead, adopting a transcendental attitude about life. In other words, one's living goes beyond the realm of forms and bodies. If one harbors no particular sentiments or personal preferences that would encourage a feeling of acquisitiveness or protectiveness, one simultaneously attains the ultimate freedom in life.

Brilliantly, Master Zhuang suggests a way of life that is "dependent on nothing" (*wusuo dai*). What is the life "dependent on nothing" like? The sage wanders without reliance on the fixed opinions and prized possessions that constitute the normal standards of life for those with common values" (Crandell 1983, 115). Master Zhuang elaborates this ideal state of spirituality in a mythological passage about Master Lie:

Master Lie could ride upon the wind wherever he pleased, drifting marvelously, and returning only after fifteen days. Although he was not embroiled in the pursuit of blessings and thus was able to dispense with walking, still there was something that he had to rely

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<sup>5</sup> See Michael Crandell, "On Walking without Touching the Ground: 'play' in the Inner Chapters of the Chuang-tzu" (Mair 1983:101-124).

upon. Supposing there were someone who could *ride upon the truth of heaven and earth*, who could *chariot upon the transformations of the six vital breaths* and thereby *go wandering in infinity*, what would he have to rely on? (2/1/19-21; Mair 5) (emphasis added)

Master Lie has not reached the stage of "dependent on nothing;" he still needs to rely upon external conditions. As a matter of fact, "ride upon the truth of heaven and earth" and "chariot upon the transformations of the six vital breaths," for Zhuang, symbolizes one kind of inner spiritual activity in which one transcends the limits of external conditions. It is also one kind of subjective experience in which one flows unconditionally with the vital breaths (*qi*). Therefore, we are able to say that the sage who attains to this stage of "dependent on nothing" also joins in unity with Dao. That is why Zhuang states that one would go wandering in infinity with nothing to rely on.

I propose that this freedom of carefree wandering is simultaneously the stage of Zhuang's mystical quest that is attaining unity with Dao. Carefree wandering is a manifestation of the mystical unity with Dao. After one enters the extrovertive transformed consciousness that is derived from one's daily experience of "carefree wandering," one experiences the world free from egoistic bias. Simultaneously, one begins to enter the introvertive unitive consciousness of total merging with the Dao.

(3) Mystical Unity With Dao. For Master Zhuang, Dao is all pervading. It is everywhere in the world; the world itself is a self-manifestation of the Dao. In

this sense, things are actually manifesting the Dao, each in its own way and own form. Master Zhuang asserts that the only justifiable attitude for us to take is, first of all, to know the relativity of "right" and "wrong," and second, to transcend this relativism into the stage of "equality of all things" (see Chapter Two above). At this stage, all things are essentially undifferentiated, although they are, at a lower stage of reality, relatively different and distinct from each other. Thus, a person who has this "inner light" (*yiming*) sees his own person and the whole world as a unity. Using a mystical form of expression, one is able to see that "heaven and earth were born together with me and the myriad of things are one with me" (5/2/52-53; Mair 18).

Truly as Master Zhuang later points out, "Since all things are one, how can there be anything to talk about? But since I have already said that all things are one, how can there be nothing to talk about" (5/2/53-54; Mair 18)? Indeed this is a dilemma we encounter often when discussing mysticism. To discuss any deep vision of spirituality, mystics find it is dangerous to put it into words. It is impossible not to touch this dilemma when studying Zhuang's philosophy. On the one hand, it is hard to locate any appropriate words that do not disturb or demolish the true meaning of lived reality. On the other hand, we need to understand that the "equality" of things should not be interpreted on the empirical or pragmatic level of social life. It is a very peculiar kind of vision that comes from one's mystical intuition.

Although mystical insight is hard to put into words, Zhuang does his best;

he has shown both depth of insight and mastery of language. He does not delineate anything concrete about the mystical unity. But, we can understand his insight by reading the following passages:

Do not be a corpse for fame,

Do not be a storehouse of schemes;

Do not be responsible for affairs,

Do not be a proprietor of knowledge.

Thoroughly [*jin*] embody unendingness and wander in nonbeginning.

Thoroughly [*jin*] experience what you receive from heaven but do not reveal what you attain.

Just be empty, that's all. (21/7/32; Mair 71)

These four pieces of advice of "do not" concern the preeminent spiritual practice of "detachment." Mystical unity naturally would follow after the success of such spiritual practice. It is an experience that does not involve space/time, so one is able to thoroughly "embody unendingness and wander in nonbeginning."

Moreover, the word "*jin*" (thoroughly, to the most) is repeated twice. Mystical unity, which Master Zhuang advocates, is one kind of experience that one can feel to a degree that is more than abundance. Master Zhuang emphasizes that one embraces Dao to one's heart's content, with endless joy. Just be empty, so one can be filled by the essence of Dao. Thus, we read, "I slough off my limbs and trunk, dim my intelligence, depart from my form, leave knowledge behind, and become identical with the Transformational Thoroughfare" (19/6/92-93; Mair 64). Again,

Master Zhuang stresses detachment; one not only abandons things with form, but also needs to get rid of formless things, such as knowledge and intelligence. Then, naturally one reaches mystical union with Dao. Surely, spiritual practice of this kind takes some effort, also a certain knack is essential to its success.

We cannot determine whether we who are speaking now are awake or dreaming. We may be so suddenly delighted that we don't have a chance to smile; we may break into a smile before we have a chance to arrange ourselves. Repose in what has been arranged for you and leave transformation behind, then you will be able to enter the unity of vast heaven. (18/6/81-82; Mair 62)

Perplexed by the shifting of reality, the changefulness of the element of time/space makes us feel restless. The Chinese graph for "an" (repose) is a good metaphor, it depicts a woman at home. It symbolizes that the sage already enters into a comfortable zone of no time/space difference. So naturally one is able to forget the goal and thought of transformation. With a *xin* (heart-mind) that leaves concerns of transformation behind, "thus one enters the unity of vast heaven/oneness" (*Nai ruyu liao Tianyi*), which entails participation in the Dao's eternity. In all three passages above, Master Zhuang uses the Chinese language beautifully, but at the same time, he conveys the ineffableness of pure mystical experience.

Following our tripartite approach, we realize that for Zhuang, the fulfillment of one's destiny is deeply rooted in one's relationship with Dao (or

Tian). In sum, each topic—the integrity of personhood, carefree wandering and mystical unity with Dao—is essential to Zhuang’s philosophy. Moreover, the three are interrelated, although each is important independently. Just as every step is crucial for one to reach the destination of one’s journey, although each step is also an independent action.

### Comparison and Contrast

(1) Both Meister Eckhart and Master Zhuang embrace the relationship with Ultimacy as their life’s goal. In the relationship with Ultimacy, Eckhart stresses the love and closeness between God and humans. Master Zhuang emphasizes a way of spiritual sublimation that enhances the communion between the person and Dao.

The Parent-child analogy is used by each master to show the omniscience of Ultimacy and expects obedience from a human perspective. There are examples of this for Zhuang in Chapter Two, above. Master Zhuang is willing to follow his Dao-guided destiny, and Eckhart makes the similar point about following the will of God, especially when dealing with suffering. As a whole, Eckhart has a stronger tendency to draw the God-human relationship in an anthropocentric way. It is notable that he uses the terms of social relationship between humans, such as bride/bridegroom, virgin/wife, etc., to form the analogy. Zhuang avoids such terminology in favor of words that suggest naturalness and freedom from social conventions, such as *you* (play, wandering) or *tong* (share in, join with) [Nature].



(2) Both masters agree that human life is full of uncertainty and changefulness, and that human beings are finite. Eckhart asserts that we do not own our lives, they are on loan from God. Similarly Zhuang suggests that no one can "own" anything, saying we should store all our treasures under heaven, so that no one is able to carry them away. Each sees that most of the suffering and restlessness that bothers us is rooted in the illusional sense of possessiveness within our heart/mind (*xin*), which entails worries about whether or not "something will be gotten," and sadness about "anything [one] will lose."

Both Zhuang and Eckhart do not encourage any form of extraordinary experience. Their spiritual practices are based on using ordinary daily life in order to reveal the extraordinary. Meister Eckhart does not believe in any special form of mortification, nor does Master Zhuang. Zhuang perhaps even goes to the extreme of thinking any deliberate doing of virtue would hurt our true nature.

(3) Meister Eckhart and Master Zhuang have different interpretations of Ultimacy—God/Dao. As for mystical unity with Ultimacy, both Eckhart and Zhuang believe, "It is ineffable!" Yet, each writes so that "tranquility," "clarity," "bliss" and other good human spiritual qualities are revealed to their readers. Whether or not the mystic's experience is a product of his emotions, and whether or not there can be an objective account of mystical experience, the "fruit" of mystics' spirituality remains. Many centuries ago, Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart shared their spiritual fruits with us. Just as Zhuang was able to appreciate the "happiness" of fish in a river, without concrete proof of this, we can sense the

flavor of the mystical experiences of Eckhart and Zhuang in and beyond their centuries-old words.

## CONCLUSION

### Returning Home

*Sleeping on the hearth of the living world  
yawning at home before the fire of life  
feeling the presence of the living God  
like a great reassurance  
a deep calm in the heart  
a presence  
as of the master sitting at the board  
in his own greater being  
in the house of life. -- D. H. Lawrence*

Several tasks were undertaken in this comparative study of Meister Eckhart and Master Zhuang. In the first chapter, we studied their attitudes and comments on the usage of language, including each one's own tendency to use negative expressions and paradox. Each has much to say about Ultimacy, yet acknowledges some aspects of it are ineffable. Both are excellent writers, yet they mistrust language. Paradoxically, they desire to share their insights with others and know language is the only tool they can use. Their linguistic skepticism is a bright reminder of the pre-existing limits on our way to express the truth.

In the second and third chapters, we inquired into the nature of Ultimacy, looking at the two Masters' respective concepts and terms for it (God and Godhead; Tian-Di and Dao). Tian is always connected with Di (the Earth); both

stand for Mother Nature and its creative power. On a metaphysical level Tian meets with Dao, which is the principle of nature. Nevertheless, just as God is from Godhead, Dao is the ineffable source of Tian-Di. For Zhuang, Dao is existing everywhere, including ants, tiles, and as low as shit and piss. Zhuang's cosmology is better defined as "pan-Daoism" than "pantheism." His Tian and Dao refer to a natural entity, not a personified ruler.

For Eckhart, God is defined as existence, intellect, love and compassion. His concept of God overlaps with that of Godhead when he teaches about Trinitarian Persons in the Godhead. Godhead as the ground of God is explained by a process (or a stage) of emanation from each side. The differences between God and Godhead are mainly that God works and Godhead reposes. The nature of Godhead is described as God beyond God, moreover, as the One, as unity.

Chapter Four showed that, from the ontological point of view, Zhuang's Tian and Eckhart's God share common ground. Each is viewed as the source of creative power and the sustaining principle of the universe (Nature). However, Tian and God are very different entities when we examine them from the theological perspective. We found that Eckhart's God is more personified than Tian. For Zhuang, Tian is not like a person who would have preference: Tian is very impersonal. It is significant that Tian, accordingly, is not a ruler. Instead, its operation and creativity are nothing but natural developments.

Moreover, our study shows Zhuang's Dao is very similar to Eckhart's Godhead in the way each is defined. Dao and Godhead are defined as the

nothingness (*wu*), as the source of function and technique, as the source of virtue. For Zhuang and Eckhart, Dao and Godhead are the reality inside and beyond this space-time continuum. For them, the Ultimate is the origin of all beings, a primordial existence prior to the universe. Moreover, Dao and Godhead are the ultimate principle, the support and guidance for us to follow. It is significant that each Master urges us to return to the origin of our being, which is closely connected with Dao, for Zhuang, with Godhead, for Eckhart. If we ask whether or not this "returning" is the premier goal of our spiritual path, then Zhuang and Eckhart give us a positive answer. That is why we now need to comment further on the very important topic touched on in Chapter Five: the Ultimate in relation to human beings.

As we shall see, the notion of unity (or union) is very essential to describe very deep levels of relationship between the Ultimate and human beings for Zhuang and Eckhart. For Zhuang and Eckhart, there are many permutations in the ideal relationship with Ultimacy, as reflected in our tripartite approach in Chapter Five. Each Master views a certain relationship with Ultimacy as his life's goal. Zhuang's mystical unity with Dao, in many ways, is similar to Eckhart's mystical kiss of the soul, which entails the deepest form of intimacy between God and the soul. Based on Eckhart's teaching, the soul was created according to God's perfection; thus, mystical union would bring the soul back to where she came from. For Zhuang, "returning to the true" (*fan qi zhen*) signifies we are able to see that our own person and the whole world has the same origin. Moreover,

resting in this state of *xin* (heart-mind) that leads to the mystical unity with Dao, the two Masters assert agreeably that we need to do our part of work, as further elaborated below.

In order to syncretize the concepts of spiritual "returning" of the two Masters, I use the term "Returning Home," which is a metaphor showing that we can simply return to a place (or a spiritual state) where we will feel comfortable. Actually, Returning Home is not an inventive notion of this writer. The idea is based on the two Masters' teachings. Meister Eckhart, when he talks about the soul's three paths to be with God, mentions that one is "a path and yet is a being-at-home. It is to see God immediately in his ownness" (*Teacher* 341). In the chapter entitled "Autumn Floods" in *Zhuang Zi*, we find the following significant passage describing the depth of Zhuang's spirituality:

Master Zhuang, however, marches through the Yellow Springs

one moment and ascends to the empyrean the next.

With him, there is neither north nor south.

*But only untrammelled release in all four directions*

*And absorption in the unfathomable;*

*There is neither east nor west,*

*Beginning as he does in darkest obscurity*

*And returning to grand perceptivity. (45/17/77-78; Mair 163)*

(emphasis added)

For Zhuang and Eckhart, this returning can be achieved in our lifetime. It is not

that we have to die and then Return Home. Their soteriology is not about an after-death state, but instead, a state which everyone can achieve at this moment. Moreover, Master Zhuang and Meister Eckhart not only give us the directions for this spiritual path, but also provide us the key to Return Home. They share with us the same key for Returning Home: Zhuang calls it "fasting of *xin* (*xin zhai*) and Eckhart calls it "detachment, letting go" (*abegescheidenheit*). Master Zhuang teaches us to "sit and forget" (*zuo wang*). Similarly, Meister Eckhart tells us "it (the soul) comes to a state of forgetting all temporal things" (*Teacher* 336). Let us further explore these ideas in the forthcoming passages.

In the religious quest for perfection, Zhuang Zi believes that *xin* is the critical organ for reaching an ideal spiritual stage. Master Zhuang entreats his disciples to "sit and forget" and to practice the "fasting of *xin*." What he means by forgetting is to empty the *xin*. Zhuang Zi urges one not only to abandon the earthly attachment to material objects, but also to forget such products of mind games as knowledge and intelligence. Another level of forgetting suggests that "forgetting is some sort of contentment or at-homeness resulting from a lack of conscious concern" (Mair 1983:67). Zhuang offers the analogy of a good swimmer who has "forgotten" the water and, thus, can handle any trouble in the water. In order to return to a harmonious relationship with Dao, one needs to practice the "fasting of the *xin*," which purifies one's *xin* of anything that is artificial. Thus, emptying oneself allows the Dao to pour in.

Meister Eckhart teaches "inward poverty" and "detachment," which are

similar to the core of Zhuang's spiritual practice. Meister Eckhart says that one "should have a pure heart, for only that heart is pure which has annihilated everything that is created" (*Essential* 183). And according to him, "inward poverty" means a poor man wants nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing (*Essential* 199). He also points out that it is the sign of a sick heart if a person becomes glad or sorry over the transitory things of this world (*Essential* 238). About detachment, Meister Eckhart's assertion is very closed to Zhuang's words. He says:

Abandon yourself, all things, and everything you are in yourself, and take yourself according to how you are in God. (*Teacher* 285)

Thus a person must be killed and be completely dead, and must be nothing in himself, made dissimilar, and like no one. Then he is really like God. For this is God's property and nature: that he is dissimilar and is like no one. (*Teacher* 290)

The above passages indicate the core goal of Eckhart, which is an "empty spirit" that is confused by nothing, attached to nothing. In his sermon eighty-four, Eckhart elaborates how the soul strides into God with four steps. In the third step, "it comes to a state of forgetting all temporal things" (*Teacher* 336).

This study has demonstrated the closeness of the two Masters' methods, and of the nature of their accounts of experiences in which one does not draw distinctions between oneself and other things, and in which one feels unified with the Ultimate. Therefore, it is my conclusion that mystical experiences are



universal and analogously alike. Nonetheless, their descriptions of mystical experiences involved reference to different doctrines or beliefs. A person brought up in a Christian environment and strenuously practicing the Christian life may have a contemplative experience which is seen as a union with God. A person brought up in a non-religious environment, perhaps, would simply interpret it and connect it with his or her personal appreciation of Nature. This speaks for the reason why Zhuang and Eckhart use different terms to convey their respective concepts of Ultimacy, although the two Masters share the same key to Return Home: emptying oneself so that Ultimacy can pour in.

In many ways, based on this study, the Ultimate Realty which the two Masters encountered is the same one. We do not know exactly why these two mystics, who lived in totally different historical contexts, were able to share so much in such depth. Yet this is why mysticism is so fascinating and allows us to find a bridge between East and West. Mysticism is a school of silent teaching, a discipline of spontaneity. Mystics speak only to express intuitive wisdom. Thus, I would like to dedicate the following verse to Master Zhuang, Meister Eckhart and all potential mystics:

At the time when the whole world is perplexed,  
we are sharing the same key.

If the world is like one sutra that is full of secret codes,  
at this moment, perhaps you and I are listening to the sounds of  
non-existing rain drops, falling hard on the keyboard of Reality. -- Yaode Lin  
(Translated and rewritten by the writer.)

## Glossary of Chinese Names and Terms

Chan	禪
Chu Wei Wang (King Wei of Chu)	楚魏王
da kuai	大塊
Dao	道
de bu xing	德不形
fan qi zhen	反其真
gaomu sihui	槁木死灰
gui	歸
Guo Xiang	郭象
Huang Jinhong	黃錦鉉
ji xin	機心
jin	盡
Lai	來
Lao Zi	老子
Meng	孟子
Nai ruyu liao Tianyi	乃入於寥天一
qi	氣
qi xue	稷學
Qi Yuan	漆園
ren yi	仁義
Shang	商
Shangqiu Xian	商丘縣
shi	視
Shiji	史記
Sima Qian	司馬遷

Song	宋
Song Kang Wang (King Kang of Song)	宋康王
Tian	天
Tian-Di	天地
tong	同
Wen Hui Jun (Lord Wenhui)	文惠君
wu	無
Wu Guangming (Kuang-Ming Wu)	吳光明
wu sang wo	吾喪我
Wusuo dai	無所待
Xiaoyao You	逍遙遊
xin	心
xin zhai	心齋
Xinyi Zhuang Zi duben	新譯莊子讀本
xu	虛
yang	陽
yi ming	以明
yi qi er hua	一氣而化
yin	陰
yu	愚
zao hua zhe	造化者
zao wu zhe	造物者
zhen jun	真君
zhen ren	真人
zhen zai	真宰
zhi buzhi zhi zhi	知不知之知
Zhou	周

Zhuang Zi

莊子

Zhuang Zi de shengming zhexue

莊子的生命哲學

zuowang

坐忘

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